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After Bodies Are Found, Some Say Canada Day Is Nothing to Celebrate

Heeding calls from Indigenous people, some places have canceled plans to mark the holiday, after hundreds of children's remains were discovered at former boarding schools for Indigenous children.



A vigil on Saturday at the site of the former Marieval Indian Residential School, where more than 750 unmarked graves were found, on the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan.

By Ian Austen

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OTTAWA — After the discovery of hundreds of bodies in unmarked graves at former schools for Indigenous children, communities across Canada are canceling or altering plans to celebrate a patriotic holiday on Thursday, increasing the pressure on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to call off national celebrations.

For decades, families were forced to send their children to boarding schools to assimilate them, in what a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission found in 2015 was an effort to wipe out their cultures. With the discovery of the bodies at two schools in Western Canada, most of them children, many members of Indigenous communities and their leaders say that it's inappropriate at this moment to celebrate the country behind the system.

“Celebrating Canada Day is being seen as inconsiderate to all the children’s lives that were lost and we encourage everyone to consider the price these children had to pay

at the hands of the Canadian government,” Chief Bobby Cameron of the Saskatchewan Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations said in a statement.

Canada Day marks the date, July 1, 1867, when three British colonies were joined together to create the Dominion of Canada. Many Indigenous people have never commemorated Canada Day and view their Canadian citizenship as something that was imposed on them. Others, however, have actively participated in celebrations in the past.

Last Thursday, the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan said that ground-penetrating radar had revealed the remains of 751 people on the grounds of a former residential school for Indigenous children.

In late May, the same technology produced a preliminary finding of 215 remains in unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. The Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation anticipates that figure will rise considerably when a final analysis is finished.

The findings in Kamloops have prompted Indigenous communities across the country to embark on searches of other former school sites that will likely take years and are expected to substantially increase the grim toll.

HOW INDIGENOUS CHILDREN VANISHED

The discovery of remains has rekindled discussion of a sinister time in Canada's history.



The discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves, like those at the former Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan, has led to calls to cancel celebrations of the country that worked so hard to erase Indigenous identity.

None of the bodies from the two schools have been exhumed, so there is no indication yet how they died or when, but the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that disease, malnutrition and physical, sexual and emotional abuse were widespread at such schools.

About 150,000 children passed through the system, which started in the 19th century and was not fully shut down until the 1990s.

The commission, established as part of a class-action lawsuit settlement with former students, estimated that about 4,100 children vanished from the schools nationwide. But an Indigenous former judge who led the commission, Murray Sinclair, said in an email this month that he now believed the number was “well beyond 10,000.” Several Indigenous leaders now put the figure at three to five times Mr. Sinclair’s estimate.



A Canada Day parade in Newcastle, Ontario, last July 1.

Compared to the national holidays of other countries, Canada Day celebrations are not as firmly woven into the country’s cultural fabric, and the day has always been less observed in French-speaking Quebec.

Matthew Hayday, a professor of history who has studied Canada Day at the University of Guelph in Ontario, said that it took 12 years to make the date a holiday and the federal government did not regularly begin hosting events on the day until the 1950s. Because of the pandemic, this year’s celebrations have been planned as virtual events.

“The way the day is marked ebbs and flows over time,” Dr. Hayday said. “In some ways this year is kind of an ideal year that if you had to cancel because the pandemic limits the amount of disruption.”

Ordinarily, the largest celebration is focused in and around Parliament Hill in Ottawa, where a large concert stage is normally erected and a day and evening of musical performances are capped with fireworks.

Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada

The remains of what are presumed to be Indigenous children have been discovered at the sites of defunct boarding schools in Canada. Here's what you should know:

- **Background:** Around 1883, Indigenous children in many parts of Canada were forced to attend residential schools in a forced assimilation program. Most of these schools were operated by churches, and all of them banned the use of Indigenous languages and Indigenous cultural practices, often through violence. Disease, as well as sexual, physical and emotional abuse were widespread. An estimated 150,000 children passed through the schools between their opening and their closing in 1996.
- **The Missing Children:** A National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up as part of a government apology and settlement over the schools, concluded that at least 4,100 students died while attending them, many from mistreatment or neglect, others from disease or accident. In many cases, families never learned the fate of their offspring, who are now known as “the missing children.”
- **The Discoveries:** In May, members of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation found 215 bodies at the Kamloops school — which was operated by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969 — after bringing in ground-penetrating radar. In June, an Indigenous group said the remains of as many as 751 people, mainly children, had been found in unmarked graves on the site of a former boarding school in Saskatchewan.
- **Cultural Genocide:** In a 2015 report, the commission concluded that the system was a form of “cultural genocide.” Murray Sinclair, a former judge and senator who headed the commission, recently said he now believed the number of disappeared children was “well beyond 10,000.”
- **Apologies and Next Steps:** The commission called for an apology from the pope for the Roman Catholic church's role. Pope Francis stopped short of one, but the archbishop of Vancouver apologized on behalf of his archdiocese. Canada has formally apologized and offered financial and other search support, but Indigenous leaders believe the government still has a long way to go.

Steven Guilbeault, the federal minister whose department organizes the celebrations in the capital, said in an email that the virtual celebrations would go ahead. But he added that the government would focus its attention on commemorating residential school students on Sept. 30, which a recently passed law has made into a statutory holiday, National Day of Truth and Reconciliation.

“We recognize that for many Canada Day is not an occasion to celebrate,” Mr. Guilbeault wrote. “This has been a deeply emotional and traumatic time for Indigenous communities across the country.”

Outside of the capital, celebrations are generally organized by local governments or volunteer committees.

Several of them have now canceled their plans out of respect for Indigenous communities.

“I acknowledge that the Indigenous community has suffered and continues to suffer and grieve,” Angie Hallman, one of the Canada Day organizers in the rural community of Wilmont Township, Ontario, said in an online post announcing her group’s plans to cancel all celebrations, in person and virtually, in support of Indigenous people. “We stop, sit and grieve in silence with them.”

Some local governments in British Columbia and Saskatchewan also called off celebrations.

Last week Erin O’Toole, the leader of the opposition Conservative Party, criticized cities and towns for canceling celebrations.

“I can’t stay silent when people want to cancel Canada Day,” Mr. O’Toole said in a speech to his caucus in which he acknowledged that the finding of the remains was a “necessary awakening” on the need for reconciliation between Indigenous people and the rest of Canada.

He added: “But let’s also channel the pain of a Canada falling short to build up the country, not tear it down.”

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