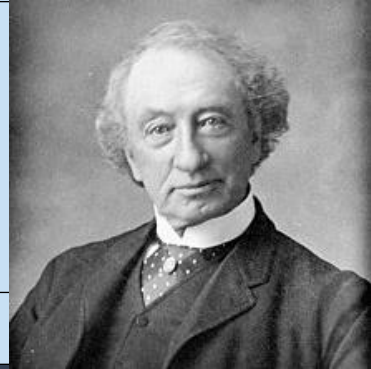


# “JOHN A. MACDONALD, ‘THE CHINESE’ AND RACIST STATE FORMATION IN CANADA.” BY TIMOTHY J. STANLEY

The first ‘Prime Minister’ of Canada, John A. Macdonald is “remembered in English Canadian nationalist discourse as the father of the Canadian Confederation.”

Timothy J. Stanley examines the **1885 Electoral Franchise Act**, Macdonald’s self-declared “greatest triumph” which denied the vote to any “person of Mongolian or Chinese race,” and argues that Macdonald was “**also the father of biologically defined Canadian white supremacy as an organizing principle of the state.**”



John A. Macdonald, 1875. Accessed 11 Dec 2023. [upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/71/John\\_A\\_Macdonald\\_%28ca.\\_1875%29.jpg/330px-John\\_A\\_Macdonald\\_%28ca.\\_1875%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/71/John_A_Macdonald_%28ca._1875%29.jpg/330px-John_A_Macdonald_%28ca._1875%29.jpg)

## TERMINOLOGY AND THE BASICS

- “**Racist state**” instead of “**racial state**”. This small distinction makes *racisms*, instead of *race*, the active process in state formation. **Racisms “mak[e] race, not the other way around.”**
  - **Racisms are plural**. There are many different racisms. Though they are intertwined and often interact with or inform one another, they are not interchangeable. **They all have “their own histories and consequences.”**
  - **Racisms, defined**: First, they involve *racialization*, i.e. sorting populations into “mutually exclusive groups,” usually based on alleged phenotypic or cultural difference. Racialization is always *relational*. Second, these are organised into *exclusions*, which are intentionally enacted by other humans. Third, there must be “negative consequences for the racialized and excluded.”
- Modern state systems are central in organising and inheriting racisms**, as a “mechanism of dominance.”

## LEGISLATIVE RACISMS AND BACKGROUND TO THE 1885 ELECTORAL FRANCHISE ACT

Racialized exclusions of Indigenous and Black populations were central parts of the state system well before 1885. However, earlier racisms were based on ideas about *cultural* difference rather than *biological* difference.

“Enfranchisement” for Indigenous men was proposed in 1857. Adult males could give up “Indian” status to receive the vote and a portion of reserve land as private property. It was a tool to further the **cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples** and **enforce European ways of life as dominant**. This also emphasized that European “civilization” meant **ownership of private property** (i.e., **dispossessed Indigenous land**). In 20 years, only one man was enfranchised. However, many Indigenous people were socially assimilated, and most of the rest were displaced, impoverished and in no position to meet property requirements. This was the same time the Northwest Rebellion was being suppressed, and the Plains Cree were being “subjugated militarily,” that is, a time when the Canadian military was actively waging war on Indigenous nations to further the colonial project.

Legislation did not overtly discriminate against Black Canadians, but **state-sanctioned social practices maintained anti-Blackness**. This manifested in residential and educational segregation, enforced impoverishment, and biased court systems, most of which had **cultural racism** as their basis.

Racialized Chinese were nearly the **largest non-Indigenous group in BC**. They were the vast majority of labourers on the Canadian Pacific Railway project, and many others were propertied merchants. Chinese voting rights were restricted for things like having “no British instincts”; that is, cultural differences. Prior to 1885, however, many Chinese people had voted.

## MACDONALD'S PROPOSAL AND REACTIONS

Macdonald's call to disenfranchise "Chinamen" was **instantly controversial**. His contemporaries in the House of Commons were "shocked" by his proposition, and raised objections like the Chinese were "industrious people" and had "as good a right [to] be allowed to vote as any other British subject of foreign extraction." There was confusion over categorization; for example, Hong Kong migrants, though racialized as Chinese, were British subjects. One Member of Parliament asked if "naturalized 'Chinamen' ceased to be 'Chinamen' and became British subjects." Seeing the issue that one could and did change cultural characteristics, **Macdonald amended the line to read "a person of Mongolian or Chinese race."**

→ European ideas on "race" were rather fluid at this time, **often used to refer to sociocultural "types," and ethnic or national groups** (rather than biological distinctions). Acceptance of Darwin's theories of evolution around this time in Canada coincided with popularization of race as biological and mutually exclusive categories.

Macdonald argued that exclusion was necessary because if Chinese people settled in great numbers they might **"control the vote of that whole Province, and...they might enforce those Asiatic principles...which are abhorrent to the...Aryan principles of this House."** Notably, Macdonald was **the only member of the House or Senate** to use the word "**Aryan**" to describe Canadian society and suggest that the Chinese and Europeans were biologically distinct. He seems to have subscribed to Gobineau's school of thought on the 'pure' "Aryan race", which "founded all major world civilizations but had become corrupted by interbreeding with inferior races."

*"All natural history...shows that while the crosses of Aryan races are successful...Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with the Africans or the Asiatics. It is not to be desired that they should come; that we should have a mongrel race, that the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed by a cross or crosses of that kind." – John A. Macdonald*

Reason for exclusion being **biological** rather than **cultural** means that shifting sociocultural norms **cannot become reason for inclusion; Macdonald sought permanent exclusion**. He was threatened by the potential political weight of Chinese people more than supposed biological impurity (he had no plan to disenfranchise Black and non-Chinese mixed-race Canadians). Indigenous and Black peoples were not seen the same way because of long-term forced impoverishment, dispersion, and assimilation. Racialized Chinese were large in number and integral to the railroad project. Many others were merchants and property owners. **Thus, they were a threat to the property-owning dominance of racialized Europeans**. The earlier Chinese Immigration Act restricted workers but **did not apply to merchants; the Electoral Franchise Act did**. This ensured Chinese labour and finance could be used to complete the railway, but they would have no political power.

*"If nothing else, the principled opposition of members of the Canadian House of Commons and Senate...gives the lie to the claim of MacDonalld apologists that, if Macdonald was racist, so was everyone else at the time."*

## IMPACT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Superficially, the enfranchisement of Indigenous peoples and disenfranchisement of racialized Chinese seem unrelated, but they were used in tandem in the Electoral Franchise Act to ensure the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the absorption of culture, while maintaining the dominance of racialized European property owners.

Chinese Canadians did not fully gain the vote until 1947, and so had no say in the policies that shaped their lives. They were forced into poverty and isolation en masse. Exclusion from the system meant that racialized Chinese (and other Asians) "were defined as people who were not and could never be 'Canadian'," which is an insidious logic that continues to be seen and felt. State-sanctioned biological racisms would go on to seriously affect "Canadian Blacks, Japanese, South Asians, and Jews, as well as Chinese and Indigenous people" up until today.

***"Perhaps it is time that Canadians commemorate these exclusions and bear witness to the thousands and even millions of lives that they have ruined, rather than celebrate the architects of white supremacy as national heroes."***

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