

# Sorry Nation-The Age of Apology A Global Industry:

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Images via: Piktochart

## Thoughts/Considerations:

Despite the success of those who are and have been marginalized disproportionately by the Canadian state in their movements for redress and recognition, there is still a long way to go. Compensation payments and apologies made by the government **only go so far as to create change**. It's critical to recognize that any acknowledgment or action taken by the state to address these injustices is **because these groups of people have taken it upon themselves to push for change and recognition**. If not for the redress movements sparked by those who have been and are marginalized, the state would not have responded or apologized for these events. Compensation payments and state apologies are **symbolic and performative** for the very reason that the state would never have engaged in these discourses if not for the push back by those affected. The experiences of those marginalized become historicized because the state frames these injustices as a 'sad chapter' in Canadian history. This action is problematic because **it absolves the state/government and white settler society of its guilt**, erasing that these unjust systems/structures still exist from the consciousness of society. Changing the relationships, structures and systems, means **we have to move beyond apologizes** for a single event and acknowledge the systems that allowed for these perpetuations of harm and violence to occur.

## Reflection Questions:

1. How do we move beyond symbolic measures taken by the state of redress into dialogue that addresses, acknowledges and changes systems of colonialism, racialization, prejudice, violence and harm?
2. What can be done to move beyond frameworks of state-imposed reconciliation into discourses led and created by Indigenous peoples that deal with land restitution, resurgence and the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty?
3. How do we ensure that the histories and experiences of those marginalized are not erased from critical consciousness and whitewashed by dominant settler-colonial discourses? How do we carry these stories forward accurately and respectfully?

## Movements for Redress

- The implementation of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's multiculturalism project and policy was to appease groups of people disproportionately marginalized by the state who were speaking up and advocating for apologies, acknowledgments and redress.
- During the 1970s/80s, Pierre Trudeau's government was unwilling to apologize for historical injustices because his government was not personally responsible for them
- Japanese Canadians, Chinese Canadians, individuals from Ukrainian communities and Indigenous peoples all pushed back against nation-building projects, advocating for a change in historical narratives and representation via redress movements
- Communities were fighting for the government to accept responsibility for what it had done, apologize for the role it played and compensate people adequately, creating change for the better

## Chinese Canadians-Sorry for the Head Tax

- Heritage Minister Raymond Chan announced a settlement in response to the redress demand for payers of the Head Tax towards the end of Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberal government reign. Although reached with the National Congress of Chinese Canadians and ten other organizations, none of these groups represented the surviving head tax payers, retraumatizing and further racializing individuals
- In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology, offering \$20,000 in compensation to those who paid the tax or who had spouses who paid. Roughly 800 people were compensated individually, despite there being between 82,000-97,000 Chinese immigrants who paid the tax between 1885-1923
- The Head Tax gave the government \$1.5 billion in revenue, showing how the redress and compensation was not adequate, but Chinese Canadians saw the apology as a start
- In 2014 BC apologized, and in 2018 Vancouver apologized for discriminatory laws/regulations imposed

## Sorry for the Komagata Maru

- Stephen Harper gives an apology in 2008 at a Sikh festival in Surrey, BC. He frames the *Komagata Maru* as a 'sad chapter' in Canadian history
- On May 18th, 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for the 'incident' in the House of Commons. Trudeau's apology is to the victims and the descendants for the 'great injustice' that occurred
- Both Harper and Trudeau focused on a single incident, failing to address the policy that restricted immigration from 'non-traditional' countries, such as India, before the 1990s. The apologies did not address the structural racism that led to or has been maintained since the event of the *Komagata Maru*

## Sorry for Ukrainian Internment

- In 1985, a redress campaign was created, advocating for an acknowledgement of the internment of Ukrainians
- Between 1994-2002, the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association, along with community groups, raised funds to erect plaques and monuments from Nova Scotia to British Columbia to raise awareness
- In 2005, the government acknowledged the internment of Ukrainians
- In 2008, funds were allocated for historical recognition through the creation of monuments
- It's important to note the political division (left and nationalist) between Ukrainian Canadians. Not all of them were interested in redress because the majority of them were affected by the Wartime Elections Act and disenfranchisement, not internment

## Japanese Canadians-Sorry for Internment

- The internment of Japanese peoples during WW2 racialized a community of individuals once viewed as Canadian citizens into dangerous peoples, taking away their civil rights. They were uprooted and dispossessed.
- The National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) advocated for redress regarding civil rights without presenting Japanese Canadians as victims. They wanted an acknowledgement that Japanese Canadians were wronged and that democracy had betrayed them. The NAJC saw redress as justice
- Under Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's government, as a gesture of symbolic redress in 1988, Japanese Canadians were compensated with the NAJC. \$21,000 to each living Japanese Canadian individual who was interned while \$12 million allocated for community and educational programs with another \$12 million for a race relations foundation
- The language used by the state regarding redress demonstrates the state's persistence of Canadianization through assimilation and erasure. The state owns the dominant discourses through language, creating unresolved political struggles
- It's critical to recognize that the achievement of redress occurred so the state could further nation-building projects. Transforming the Japanese from enemy aliens into friendly Japanese Canadians works to erase the history of a violent uprooting through processes of Canadianization. Through a discourse of redress, Japanese Canadians become an identity formation that the state could align with social justice, anti-racism, participatory democracy and human rights. The label of Japanese Canadian is a floating signifier with a range of alternative significations

## Indigenous Peoples, Reconciliation and a Sorry State

- Any attempts made by the state to renew, reframe and fix relationships with Indigenous peoples responds directly to Indigenous resistance. Responses by the state occur due to Indigenous challenges to the assumed sovereignty of the state
- Reconciliation gained recognition as a growing discourse in the 1990s through a global movement/industry of issuing apologies and advocating for forgiveness
- Reconciliation is an entirely Western framework/concept that works to legitimize the status quo. It does nothing to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination or address the problem of land restitution/reclamation. Reconciliation allows the state to appear that it is doing things differently without actually having to change anything (nothing occurs beyond the level of words and false promises). Imposed by the state, reconciliation furthers nation-building by erasing societal consciousness of colonialism committed by the government against Indigenous peoples. As a symbolic measure, it is less about the well-being of Indigenous peoples and more about easing settler-guilt and absolving Canadians from responsibility/accountability. It renders Indigenous assertions of nationhood consistent with state assertions of sovereignty over Indigenous peoples, lands and nations
- Despite apologies, commissions, reports and compensation payments, the government fails to adequately respond to the needs of Indigenous peoples because it only condemns the historical injustices without acknowledging the current perpetuations of violence and harm, framing colonialism as a historical event instead of recognizing it as a structure. Indigenous rights within this view are subordinate to the sovereignty of the Crown/state
- Reconciliation and a politics of recognition framework do nothing to address relations between Indigenous peoples and the state to create a better/just future. Indigenous cultural differences are accommodated to reconcile relationships without addressing colonialism, land, Indigenous sovereignty and traditional ways of being, knowing and living. The legacy of past abuse is overcome and acknowledged through these frameworks, but the colonial structure stays untouched/changed
- Indigenous-state relations cannot be changed without a conversation that centers/focus on land restitution, the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, freedom and self-determination

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# State Responses to Indigenous Sovereignty- An Apology Nation: A Timeline

1987

- The Meech Lake Accord proposed a new way of moving forward as a Confederation
- The language of Indigenous rights is included but is not defined. There was a failure to recognize the political concerns of Indigenous nations. Elijah Harper (Manitobian MLA) advocated for the definition of Indigenous rights and recognition of sovereignty. The government failed to address the need to define Indigenous rights, and Harper used the rules of the legislature to kill the Accord

1991

- Phil Fontaine, a prominent Indigenous leader, comes forward and discloses his experiences of abuse in a residential school, encouraging others to come forward through this
- In response to growing land claim issues and movements for the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) forms through government support to assess Indigenous-state relations

1998

- The government releases an action plan called Gathering Spirit, claiming to build upon the core principles of RCAP
- Focuses on repairing the psychological and damaged status of Indigenous peoples through community healing. One-time grant payment of \$350 million for community-based healing to address the legacy of residential schools. The grant establishes the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in March
- Recognition of a colonial past but no mention of land restitution or sovereignty recognition

2008

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is created to raise awareness of colonialism and residential schools (inform Canadians what happened, promote awareness and document history)
- On June 11th, Stephen Harper issues an apology for residential schools but fails to invoke colonialism historical and presently

2015

- In June, the TRC releases an Executive Summary of its findings, along with 94 Calls to Action that address reconciliation efforts that need to occur between Indigenous peoples and the government
- The 94 Calls to Action are a response to the oral histories recorded within the TRC of colonial abuse and violence
- The TRC documents the truth of survivors, families and communities

1990

- On July 11th, a 78-day standoff begins between the Mohawk nation of Kanesatake, the Quebec provincial police and the Canadian armed forces. To prevent the building of a nine-hole golf course on sacred and traditional lands, blockades are put up by Indigenous peoples
- Indigenous solidarity actions occurred across Canada in response
- The first lawsuit by a residential school student survivor is filed

1996

- In November, RCAP is published and offers a vision of reconciliation based on mutual respect, responsibility and sharing. Included is a total of 440 recommendations with a call for a deeper inquiry into residential school experiences expressed
- RCAP is the result of a \$58 million project and 178 days of public hearings in 96 communities across Canada

2007

- The Indian Residential School Agreement is created, involving churches, the federal government and Indigenous peoples
- A common school experience payment compensates survivors and families for deceased students through an independent assessment program. Amounts are modest, however, and calculated based on a tabulation of suffering
- There is a call for the government to apologize

2009

- At a G20 meeting, Harper says, "Canada has no history of colonialism", erasing Indigenous experiences and whitewashing Canadian history

2017

- On November 24th, Justin Trudeau issues an apology for/to residential school survivors on behalf of the Canadian government

Background Image via: Colin Smith Photography

## Why Saying Sorry is Not Enough-A Reflection:

Apologies issued by the state never address or acknowledge the systems of colonialism, racialization and prejudice that allowed these events of injustice to occur and sustain nation-building projects presently. These apologies are symbolic measures taken by the state to reinscribe the status quo because; they fail to address and acknowledge the systems and structures that allowed for the disproportional marginalization and perpetuation of harm on people by the government to occur in the first place. Within these apologies, these events are framed as 'sad chapters' within Canadian history as the state absolves itself of guilt and erases the continued perpetuations of racialization and colonialism from society's mind. The systems and structures that led to these events are still in place, and without a proper acknowledgement, compensation payments and empty apologies mean nothing to those who have been and are presently affected. "Colonialism is ongoing" (Cornthassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi, p.155), and without recognition of it as a structure, the state remains complicit in a system of harm. Reconciliation is a pacifying discourse to renew relations because it is a Western system imposed by the state and is premised on the non-recognition of Indigenous sovereignty to reinscribe state power. Changing the present systems means acknowledging that injustice is ongoing and cannot be framed as a 'sad chapter' in Canada's historical narrative. The voices and stories of those who are and have been marginalized have to be recognized to shift these pacifying discourses. Turning back to the community and centring approaches led and created by those affected allows for push back against the state and the regeneration, revitalization and reclamation of cultures and identities. Moving away from symbolic and performative actions by the government means acknowledging both past and current systems of colonial harm. Challenging settler versions of history, nation-building projects and colonial systems means we as a society have to center the voices and stories of resilience of those affected, forcing the state to implement change beyond symbolic, performative and pacifying measures.

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