

Aboriginal health and the rise of racism in Canada

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Are Canada's 1.3 million Aboriginal people being deliberately or inadvertently discriminated against by a government overly concerned about its resource development strategy? However counter-intuitive the

question is of a nation widely seen as tolerant (and that ranks 7th of 132 countries on the Social Progress Index), it's being asked by Aboriginal people wary of more policies that exclude and control.

Recent studies show a [rise](#) in discrimination against Aboriginal people such that Canada may have a [worse](#) race problem than the USA; racism [pervades](#) the health system and is highly correlated with poor outcomes. Indeed, [astonishing public health images](#) of First Nations communities confirm health outcomes [on par with many poorer countries](#), worsened by epidemic levels of depressive and behavioral disorders. These are associated with the intergeneration impact of an abusive assimilation program known as the Indian Residential School (IRS) system (1880-1996) in which 150,000 children were taken from their families and [forced](#) to attend ten months of every year.

In 2006, new reasons for discrimination emerged. A newly elected Conservative government launched a \$600 billion development plan for the oil, gas, mining, and pipeline industries with many of its initiatives on, or near, aboriginal traditional lands. In a departure from the past, aboriginals began to fight back with increasing success by accessing the courts, holding public demonstrations and forming alliances with non-Aboriginal interest groups.

Government responses to First Nations' initiatives have been swift and harsh. Carried out by a worrisome combination of those who make the laws and those that enforce them, this approach portrays Aboriginal people as the main barrier to Canada's resource development and its future prosperity. Especially striking is that these responses constitute the opposite of common discrimination-reducing strategies - [tackling inequalities](#), [increasing public information](#), [building coalitions](#), and [collective action](#) - and therefore seem systematic and purposive.

Four strategies thwarted

One means of marginalizing (and promoting racist views) is "victim-blaming", that is, making victims appear responsible for the circumstances in which they find themselves. The federal government has managed [information](#) so that data that would help explain antisocial behavior and disparities are repressed while data that bolster the [stereotype](#) (violence, alcohol abuse and so forth) are left to flourish. For example, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government has fought hard to withhold IRS documents showing government-sponsored [medical](#) and [nutritional](#) experiments on the children, the use of [electric shocks](#) on the recalcitrant, and an astonishing [3,000](#) onsite child deaths at the residential schools. Despite pleadings from First Nations leadership, [Canadian Archivists](#) and the [Commissioner](#) of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the government has stymied full access to IRS documents; when 40,000 IRS abuse victims finally gave recorded testimony to the TRC, the government turned to the Courts for permission to [destroy this very evidence](#).

Similarly, pleadings by Canadian and international scientists for data on existing and new disparities (particularly those related to the oil sands) have been ignored by the Harper government. As to inequalities themselves and the notion of [creating a more level playing field](#), the government has been stone-faced, responding instead by cancelling a 5 billion dollar [Federal Accord](#) and, over recent years, cutting most [Aboriginal-led health programming](#) meant to address the sequelae of the IRS.

Another discrimination-reducing strategy, [extension of group boundaries](#), was embraced by First Nations who began to form high-profile alliances with a host of well-respected environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Among its responses, the government publically engaged the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) to conduct [extensive audits](#) on their records based on the notion that they were too political. The Minister of Finance unabashedly warned, that if he were one of these groups “[I would be cautious](#)”. What he did not say was that the CRA - which will launch an investigation in response to public complaints - received formal filings from [Ethical Oil](#) (an online activists group working in defense of the oil-sands development) whose founder, is currently the director of issues management in the Prime Minister's Office.

Aboriginals also took [collective action](#) as an obvious discrimination-reducing option. The First Nations and Family Caring Society (headed by Cindy Blackstock), filed legal claims against the government for failing to provide adequate healthcare to Aboriginal children; the government had the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) place her under surveillance, gathering [a 400 page file](#) on her in the process. The Federal Privacy Commissioner condemned these actions, ordered the agencies to cease and desist and destroy the files. Similarly, [reports](#) released this month show that these two agencies are proactively monitoring aboriginal peaceful protest groups in expectation of demonstrations against resource extraction projects.

Indeed, [critics](#) are questioning the professionalism, non-partisanship and closeness of these agencies to industry that is so detrimental to aboriginal well-being. They ask of CSIS “[why are they producing these intelligence reports on protest activity they acknowledge is legitimate and outside their mandate](#)”? Revelations of a [44 page RCMP memo](#) this month identifying Aboriginal protesters as the political fringe while extolling the virtues and inevitability of the oil sands and repeatedly [casting doubt](#) on global warming. Past revelations that these agencies are sharing information with industry and that the watchdog overseeing them was led by industry lobbyists lend credence to these worries.

An evolving polity points the way forward

As to a way forward, the government may wish to take a step back now that the oil market has partially collapsed, towards a more balanced and less frenetic approach to economic development. The polity is evolving. While ordinary Canadians may not yet perceive the plight of Aboriginal people as a top priority, they are nonetheless uncomfortable with the persistence of the Indian Act of 1886 (the only race-based legislation in a Western democracy), the requirement that Aboriginal people have an identity card and their

disenfranchisement by the so-called [Fair Elections Act](#) (having only gained the vote in 1960). They are embarrassed by the quality of public discourse: by Mr. Harper's [assertion to the G20](#) that "Every nation wants to be Canada...We also have [no history of colonialism](#)"; by a former acting Minister for Indian and Northern Affairs claim that it isn't the government's job to make sure children have full bellies - then asking "Is it my job to feed [my neighbour's child](#)? I don't think so". In contrast, [provincial and territorial governments](#) have signaled a desire to tackle at least some of the inequalities related to First Nations grievances. The [courts](#) have increasingly handed First Nations victories related to resource development, suggesting consultation and dialogue are the way forward for the federal government. It ought to realign its strategic planning and management with core Canadian values; better [lean](#) than mean.