

Colonialism in the landscape of apology and reconciliation in Canada and Australia.

Introduction

Australia and Canada are both former settler states which have histories of oppression of the indigenous people in their countries. After the end of colonial rule, increasing evidence of abusive policies to “kill the Indian in the child” has led to a demand for an official apology of the past mistreatment of indigenous people (Shelley, 2014). The politics of forced child removal in Australia and Canada has become the symbol of indigenous people’s pain and suffering under colonial regimes with consequences to this day. The governments in both countries want to leave the past behind and strengthen their relationship with the indigenous people, but the process is difficult to navigate because colonial power relations are still present in Canadian and Australian society (Dominello, 2017). This paper will survey the landscape of apology and reconciliation by drawing parallels between Australia and Canada. The apology and reconciliation process is paradoxical because it is characterized by present manifestations of colonial power relations. This is found when the governments of Canada and Australia holds the power over defining the apology process and the content of it. Also, they are using their power to define history and the indigenous experience by not categorizing the policies of forced child removal as genocide. Lastly, indigenous self-determination and sovereignty is understood from a colonial point of view.

I will assess the landscape of apology and reconciliation in Canada and Australia and make a comparison. I plan to show how the apologies were implemented and how the process of apology and reconciliation develops with the intention of showing how colonialist notions are reproduced. First, I will explain what the political apology is, second, I will present a brief background of the reconciliation process leading up to the 2008 apologies in Australia and Canada. Third, I will point out how colonialism is present in the apologies and in the overall process of reconciliation in Canada and Australia.

Analysis

What is a political apology?

In the last 25 years there has been a significant use of political apologies by governments to express remorse for their responsibility in past wrongdoings. For example, the American presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush have apologized for the treatment of Japanese Americans during WWII. Similarly, the French President Jacques Chirac has apologized for how the country contributed to the persecution of Jews during World War II. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has also expressed regret for not supporting the Irish when they experienced the potato famine. The high frequency of such political apologies has given this period the name “the age of apology” (Edwards, 2010).

The rise of official apologies is linked to the human rights evolution of the past half century. All of the declarations and covenants made to ensure that humans all over the world are protected by the same rights provides a strong notion of universalism. The main idea of these pledges is to “achieve international co-operation in solving international problems” (Gibney & Roxtrom, 2001). These processes pushed forward the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, which was originally accepted by most nation-states except for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. However, they have since expressed their support for the declaration and intentions to better the relationship with the indigenous people in their countries (Organick, 2019).

What makes apologies a complicated and controversial affair, is the lack of consensus of what they should contain and what function they should have (Thompson, 2012). Some commentators focus more on the actual speech itself and how it is performed, while others think that the apology should be measured in actions taken to reconcile with the indigenous communities (Cels, 2015). Gibney and Roxtrom have listed several criteria for an acceptable apology, stating that it is most important that it is public, ceremonial and has a clear intention. In addition, justice and consistency are important features for its relevance too. Without these elements, the apology would most likely be condemned as a non-apology by the receiver and will not serve as a fruitful beginning of the reconciliation process. Therefore, this matter is not taken lightly upon by the states that plan to offer an apology to an offended group within their country (Gibney & Roxtrom, 2001).

With all the difficulties following an apology, one could begin to wonder why it has become the chosen method for reconciliation. One reason could be that states want to distance themselves from past beliefs that resulted in cruel violations of human rights. Further, it is a helpful tool to understand how these actions created disadvantages that the groups still suffer from. Lastly, they are made to redefine their national identity in consideration to the offended groups. Altogether, to repair the wrongs committed in the past, it is essential to address the power imbalance and create a shared vision of the way forward “to decolonise both past and present relationships” (Organick, 2019, 155).

The political apology is used as a tool to repair the relationship between the perpetrators and the victims. The hope is in creating a better future, making sure it never happens again and leave the past behind them. As Organick mentions, decolonization is of utmost importance in the reconciliation process, however the apologies and the following actions of reconciliation in Canada and Australia is characterised by the continuation of colonial power relations.

[A brief background history of the reconciliation process](#)

On 13 February 2008, Australia’s Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologized for the past wrongdoings to the aboriginal people. This was a substantial moment in Australia’s history and a long sought-after recognition for indigenous peoples’ pain and suffering since colonial rule. It had been a long fight as the reconciliation process can be traced back to 1967 with the Referendum which was made into a campaign to promote the aboriginal cause by the FCAATSI (the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders). It was not until 1991, with the Council for the Aboriginal Reconciliation Act which set out to promote justice and equality to the indigenous people, that the formal process of reconciliation began to take form (Auguste, 1960).

The need for an official apology emerged after an inquiry of the forced child removal in aboriginal communities disclosed the history of abuse, neglect and violations of human rights caused by the colonialists who sought to assimilate the aboriginal way of life. Since then, an apology became seen as the first step in the healing of trauma, trauma which has been compared to an act of genocide. Several Australian governments decided to not apologize officially, and the momentum of the movement started to fade. The 40th anniversary of the referendum highlighted the failed approach for reconciliation and

worsening of the living conditions for aboriginal people which have 17 years lower life expectancy than the average Australian (Auguste, 1960).

In the same year, on July 11, Canada's prime minister Stephen Harper apologized to Canada's indigenous people for the Indian Residential School system (IRS) (Edwards, 2010, p.62). This was a policy of assimilation of the indigenous people in Canada that lasted from 1867 to 1996. It resulted in forced child removal of 150 000 indigenous children which were taken from their homes and placed into one of the 130 residential schools across the country (De Costa, 2017). The church-run residential schools were designed to remove all trace of indigeneity in order to assimilate the children into western culture, language and religion. The colonialists believed they had to "kill the Indian, to save the man". Subsequently, the experience traumatized the individuals and the indigenous community which have had devastating consequences to this day because of the sexual, physical, and psychological abuse they were submitted to (Zalcman, 2016).

The fight for justice began when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples released the 1996 rapport revealing the truth about the residential schools (Bombay et al, 2013). In the middle of the 1980s, a growing number of survivors started to share their experience of abuse within the IRS. This rise of awareness resulted in a mass class action in 2007 in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice through the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (De Costa, 2017). This call for compensation led to the 2008 apology in the hopes of reconciliation between the indigenous people and the state. Since then, the Canadian government have established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate the aboriginal experience of the IRS as a genocide (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012).

[Manifestations of colonialism in the landscape of apology and reconciliation](#)

As O'Sullivan has argued: "Colonialism is an ongoing relational injustice. It was not a single event 'done' to indigenous peoples" (O'Sullivan, 2020, p. 80). The quote showcases that colonialism is still a problem in the landscape of apology and reconciliation, even though former settler states like Canada and Australia have given their apologies to the indigenous people and are working towards reconciliation. However, there are a few problems with the process of making up for the past wrongdoings.

The first thing to notice is the very nature of the act of apologizing. Colonial power relations are upheld between the state and the indigenous communities because of the structure of apologizing (Bentley, 2018). A simple thing like including or excluding a representative of the indigenous community in the performance has value. For example, in the Canadian apology from 2008 for the IRS, there was a debate over whether to invite representatives of the aboriginal communities onstage in the official apology ceremony, but the request was turned down by Prime Minister Harper as he decided to perform it alone (Cels, 2015). Similarly, the ceremony of apologizing in Australia did not involve an active participation of a representatives from the indigenous communities. Taken into consideration that the victim's forgiveness is the main goal of an apology, it is rather counter-effective to leave them out of the active part of the ceremony. Again, this further marks who holds the power in the room, and it diminishes the importance of the indigenous people choice to forgive the perpetrator (Dominello, 2017).

Furthermore, the content of the apologies is decided by the apologizer and giving them the power of defining their own wrongs and at the same time simplifying the indigenous history of struggle (Moses, 2011). The Australian apology by Prime Minister Rudd makes forced child removal a symbol of overall indigenous struggle which characterized the reconciliation process (Cuthbert & Quartly, 2013). The apology starts with honouring the aboriginal people and mentions the issue of how they were mistreated because of past government policies. This includes all indigenous people, but the apology turns specifically to the children that were forcibly removed from their homes when he states that: "We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations" and then "We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country" (Australian apology 2008).

Similarly, the Canadian apology only addresses the forced child removal issue when dedicating the apology to the survivors of the Indian Residential School. Thus, taking away attention to all of the other issues past and present issues (Daigle, 2019). For example, In the apology Prime Minister Harper states clearly who the apology is by concrete data of the numbers of victims when he says that "For more than a century, Indian Residential Schools separated over 150,000 Aboriginal children from their families and communities" (Canadian apology 2008). Further, he explicitly apologizes "To the approximately 80,000 living former

students” (Canadian apology 2008) for the abusive policy of the Indian Residential Schools. In this case, depending on how one looks at it, Canada could be deemed as worst because they actively chose to recognize just one out of several indigenous issues, thus devalue the other problems. At the same time, the Australian government is taking advantage of their colonial dominance to “rewrite” or “reduce” the history of indigenous struggle to forced child removal. Either way, both countries is definitely misusing their power of definition and when choosing what to apologize for.

Additionally, the focus on past acts in the apologies is another way of simplifying the issues the indigenous communities face today. Often, state apologies are oblivious to the fact that looking forward is just as important as recognizing the past (Gibney & Roxtrom, 2001). For example, both apologies only refer to and apologizes for the past and makes it sounds like its over by calling it “a sad chapter in our history (Canadian apology 2008)” or “this blemished chapter in our history (Australian apology 2008)”. This rhetoric creates an intentional distance to the former governments by condemning their past injustices. This way the current government can clear their name and the public can continue to believe that they live in a just and fair country (Blatz et al, 2009). Which happens in both apologies as Rudd states that “A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again” (Australian apology 2008) and Harper says that “There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again” (Canadian apology 2008).

Also, the definition of what the state did to the indigenous people is defined by what they choose to call it. In the case of Australia and Canada, both countries deny categorizing the past mistreatment as genocide, even though it fits most of the criteria, and it is an ongoing debate between the indigenous people and the state (McDonald, 2015). The history wars in Australia have shown that the white settlers remember the intention behind forced child removal as a positive and humanitarian policy to protect children, not as a genocide as the aboriginal people experienced it. The white settler collective memory’s conviction was shattered with the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* Report which implied genocide on the basis of human rights violations rooted in the UN laws (Muldoon, 2017).

Likewise, the Canadian collective memory differs when they are asked about the origin of the country. For the white settler population, it is a tale of discovery of land and a nation

that was built on justice and peace. On the other side, the indigenous people remember it as the complete opposite: a period of chaos, betrayal, occupation, and genocide (MacDonald, 2014). The genocide question is still contentious as in 2011 the TRC refocused upon it after years of investigating crimes committed against the victims of the IRS. They base their argument on a section from the United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC) about the removal of children from one group to another, and links it to the IRS policy (McDonald & Hudson, 2012).

The genocide claims in Australia come from the extreme assimilation of the aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the white settler population. The colonialists brought unknown and deadly diseases with them and fighting over territory ended up in a massacre of indigenous people. Furthermore, the forced child removal policy where half-caste children were placed into “white” homes. Also, marriage between full-bloods and half-castes were not supported. All this “to breed out the colour” (MacDonald, 2015) That the apology did not recognize this and has a very general description of what happened. It focuses on the aspects of the pain caused for everyone affected by this policy without being addressing it the actions explicitly. For example, Harper says that they are sorry for having “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians” (Australian apology 2008). Another problem is that they did not make an offer of compensation of their losses, made it nothing more than hollow words without meaning, but at the same time it is complicated because ‘How can you compensate for a broken mind?’ (Moses, 2011, p. 152). In a sense, the genocide happened on two levels, a genocide of people based on race and thus a genocide of the indigenous culture.

The Canadian apology avoids the word ‘genocide’ as well, but in contrast to Australia, Harper makes a point out of describing what happened in detail and the intention behind it. For example, *“Two primary objectives of the Residential Schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal”* (Canadian apology 2008). This explanation of the intention behind the policy of forced child removal as a larger issue, is non-existent in the Australian apology. This makes the Canadian apology seem more sincere, but at the same time it draws the experience of the IRS closer to the genocide

question. Still, the apology lacks a promise of compensation which ultimately undermines the suffering of the survivors and perhaps makes the insult even worse.

These history wars over determining how to remember the assimilation process could be linked to the underlying white guilt in the landscape of apology and reconciliation. The state seeks to heal their own wound from admitting failure of the assimilation project of forced child removal (Muldoon, 2017). This notion of recovering their ego-ideal shows how uncomfortable it is to acknowledge their white privilege which traces back to the alleged discovery of the land. The concept of terra nullius, the right to claim if it is uninhabited, has been a cornerstone in the justification of colonialism. It implies occupation and control of the land "discovered" (Sanderson, 2018). Of course, both Canada and Australia were already discovered, just not by the western world.

Another issue which is more related to the reconciliation process, is the lack of recognition for indigenous sovereignty. Without consideration for this problem, which is a constitutional issue, the relationship between indigenous people and the state will continue their colonial power dynamic (Short, 2012). Neither Australia nor Canada has ever been one nation, therefore it would be wrong to aim for reconciliation to make the indigenous and non-indigenous population into one entity as both Rudd and Harper wished for in their apology speeches (Sanderson, 2018, Van Krieken, 2012). The concepts of multiculturalism and integration are essential to understand the complex problematic of sovereignty and reconciliation in Australia and Canada, which is intertwined with the colonial history and the western standard of a society (Patton, 1996).

Moreover, the idea of sovereignty is a western ideology which is not compatible with the indigenous understanding of self-governance (Parrish, 2006). The aboriginal communities have their own framework for ruling that is not formalized in laws and constitutions but lived by via collective beliefs and values in their everyday life. This tends to manifest in issues over territorial governance between state and indigenous communities worldwide. For example, the Inuit living in Canada, Greenland, Russia, and the US, have been moving across borders to hunt seal and steward the Arctic waters, as it is an essential part of their culture, and the claim of land is an expression of their sovereignty, but it challenges the western international laws for crossing national boundaries (Bauder & Mueller, 2021).

Additionally, as seen in Australia, action has been taken to give back the ancestral lands to increase self-governance and close the socio-economic gap between the non-indigenous and indigenous population in the spirit of reconciliation (Wensing, 2016). For example, the colonial element manifests itself in the assessment of the success of the policy because it is compared to the western living standards, without consideration to the aboriginal choice to cultivate the land according to their customs and way of life (Altman, 2020). Again, the western way of living is fully integrated into our mindset that in the efforts of making acts and policies for reparations, it becomes problematic because it is a product of a colonialist ideology which presupposes that it knows best, and everything else is to be measured against it. Consequently, the question of how to perform justice for the indigenous people arises. So far, the reconciliation efforts have been rooted in the very same settler colonialism that they are fighting against.

The idea of giving the indigenous community the responsibility of determining what sovereignty means for them, has been proposed as a way to tackle systemic settler colonialism (Sullivan, 2020). The UN Declaration was meant to enforce this idea, but was initially turned down by Australia and Canada, together with the US and New Zealand (Organick, 2019). Since the countries especially feared changes in land rights as the declaration strengthens the indigenous claim to territory which they originally occupied. Notions such as consent and veto take away power from the coloniser and gives more agency to the colonized which poses as a threat for exploitative habit of the colonialism. Then, self-determination becomes an issue because how is it supposed to work in practice? It could mean that the indigenous people are not members of the nation state, and their laws is treated as foreign legislation (Sullivan, 2020). Altogether, the initial rejection of the Declaration is further proof of colonialism in the reconciliation processes because the countries become hesitant when another force is challenging their sovereignty over for example resources and land rights.

However, it is possible that sovereignty does not have to conform to western standards if it is interpreted as indigenous people sharing the power and political authority of the state; indigenous people would participate in the development of welfare matters such as education and health care (Alfred, 2005). In the case of Australia, the Declaration mattered most in terms of national inclusion and citizenship. Multiculturalism is problematic because

the aboriginal people see themselves as their own people, but at the same time they are Australians, which affect the national identity of the country because they include diversity, but must also distinguish and recognize indigeneity (Moses, 2011). In Canada, the notion of having one national identity seems to have less emphasis because the country has a historical stronger commitment to human rights. Therefore, they have a longer history of constitution protected rights to claims of land which is closely connected to their indigenous nationhood (Sullivan, 2020).

Conclusion

This thesis has surveyed the notion of colonialism in the landscape of apology and reconciliation in Australia and Canada. Both countries are former settler states and have a history of assimilation of the indigenous population. Forced child removal has been the most prominent issue in this regard and there are significant parallels between these processes in Australia and Canada.

These colonial injustices infringe human rights and have inflicted severe trauma on an individual and collective level in the indigenous communities, which have had negatives consequences on their socio-economic status and living conditions. These issues have led to a fight for justice and demand for an apology from the governments. In 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized for the policy of forced child removal to the Lost Generations. Later that year, the Canadian Prime Minister apologized to the survivors of the Indian Residential School system. Both apologies expressed a wish for reconciliation with the indigenous communities and hoped to bridge the gap between them. Paradoxically, the process of reconciliation has been characterized by the same colonialism that they are trying to avoid in the future, which uphold the power relations between the state and the indigenous peoples.

First, the act of apologizing is determined by who holds the power. They continue to do so by deciding what is worthy of an apology, for example both Canada and Australia put emphasis on forced child removal, while there are many other issues that could have been addressed at the same time. Of course, the indigenous communities in Canada demanded justice for the IRS and the aboriginal people in Australia wanted the government to acknowledge the historical mistreatment of their people. It must have been easier for the

governments to admit their mistakes since the issue was a thing of the past and it revolved around innocent children. Thus, giving them more distance to their past wrongdoings, minimize the damage impact, give the people what they wanted and move on with their lives.

Second, the apologies failed to address the policies of forced child removal as an act of genocide which left many indigenous peoples feeling like their struggle was belittled by their governments. The history wars in Australia and Canada are to blame for this mistake because they show the white settler population thought that assimilation into their culture by “killing the Indian in the child” was an act of mercy and necessary to maintain a civil society. At the same time, the indigenous experience was the total opposite, and it shows how the collective memory of a nation can be extremely divided.

Another prominent notion of colonialism in the reconciliation processes is the issue of sovereignty. It is a complex problem as it is often understood and applied with western standards regarding self-determination and leadership over land and people. The indigenous peoples of Canada and Australia have been forced to fit into this system, causing problems for the Inuit communities whose practices does not abide to the governments laws on national boundary crossing. Also, the success of giving back ancestral land to indigenous people in Australia have mistakenly been measured up against western living standards, which produces a false picture of reality. If real reconciliation and compensation is to occur, sovereignty needs to be understood on their own terms according to their indigenous beliefs and practices. The Canadian and Australian governments have failed to understand the importance of letting indigenous people decide what is best for them. Thus, reproducing colonial power relations by assuming that their way of life is superior and everyone else should integrate into that.

If there is to be a solution to this problem one should start with acknowledging that “Colonialism is an ongoing relational injustice. It was not a single event ‘done’ to indigenous peoples” (O’Sullivan, 2020, p. 80). Colonialism is both a past and present issue, which is difficult to handle, even though Canada and Australia have been trying to make amends for their injustices towards their indigenous populations. I find it difficult to generalize the indigenous struggle in Canada and Australia, but I think that the reconciliation process

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would improve if the underlying colonial power relations were addressed more explicitly in order to better indigenous self-determination and sovereignty.

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