

The First Nations

With a history that dates back from time immemorial, Indians form an important and distinct part of Canadian society. Christopher Columbus misnamed them "Indians" in 1492 when he thought he had arrived in India. Today, Indians are succeeding in reminding other Canadians they were once self-sustaining nations with their own forms of government. Indeed, some traditional forms of government still exist. Canadian Indians, or First Nations — the preferred term — are in a period of transition as they pursue a cultural, social, political and economic revival.

In Canada, there are nearly 540 000 registered or status Indians (approximately 1.8 percent of the total Canadian population). When "registered," the individual is recognized under federal law as being an Indian, entitled to certain rights, privileges and benefits. About 55 percent of registered Indians live on specified areas of land, called reserves, set aside for their use and benefit. There are over 2200 reserves across Canada for some 605 First Nations. Most are in rural areas, many are isolated and some are not inhabited.

Origins

Most anthropologists believe that the North American Indian migrated over the Bering Sea from Siberia, 10 000 to 30 000 years ago. When the European explorers and settlers arrived, Canada was populated by a diverse range of Aboriginal peoples who, depending on the environment, lived nomadic or settled lifestyles, were hunters, fishermen or farmers, were warlike or peaceful. They shared — and continue to share — a deep and spiritual relationship with the land and the life it supports. Each First Nation culture had distinct spiritual beliefs and ceremonies, many of which have been carried down through the generations by elders in an oral tradition.

Early Indian Administration

Britain gained control of most of North America in 1760, and three years later issued the Royal Proclamation that reserved lands for the Indians and prescribed that only governments could deal with Indians on land matters. This prompted a series of land-cession treaties under which First Nations gave up their claims to specified tracts of land in return for lump-sum cash payments and annuities. Lands were also set aside as reserves — areas for the use and benefit of the First Nations which would not be accessible to settlers coming into Canada from Europe or the United States. Under the terms of many treaties, hunting and fishing rights for First Nations were also protected.

From 1830 on, settlement on reserves in parts of what is now eastern Canada began under government guardianship; Aboriginal people effectively became wards of the state.

Post-Confederation Period

With Confederation, the new federal government was given legislative authority over "Indians and lands reserved for Indians." Passage of the first Indian Act in 1876 gave the federal government great powers to control Indians living on reserves: it dictated who was Indian and who wasn't; it controlled movement from the reserves; it dictated when and where children would go to school; and it denied Indian people the right to vote. Sections of the Act also gave the federal government authority over Indians who had no reserve lands.

Although the Indian Act was amended on a number of occasions to do away with these injustices, many of the provisions of the 1876 Act are still in place. For instance, the Act requires that the federal government supervise elections, approve or disallow First Nations by-laws, manage moneys belonging to First Nations and individuals, oversee their estates, and manage Indian lands.

Further efforts to assimilate Indians into Western society included a process called "enfranchisement." Prior to Confederation, the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 contained property and monetary inducements to encourage Indians to leave tribal societies and seek enfranchisement. The suggestion was that enfranchisement was a reward for adopting the lifestyle and customs of "civilized" citizens.

The year 1859 saw the passage of the Civilization and Enfranchisement Act, but few Indians relinquished their status and rights in favour of enfranchisements. Following Confederation, the Enfranchisement Act of 1869 intended to free Indians from their state of wardship under the federal government.

By the late 1940s and the 1950s, the Indian infant mortality rate was high and life expectancy was low. Several approaches in education, such as the system of residential schools, had clearly failed Indian youth. Housing standards on the reserves were poor. Problems associated with alcohol and unemployment were also widespread.

However, by the mid-1960s, there were signs of improvements in social and economic conditions. Health services were enhanced and Indian children had greatly improved access to higher education. By the end of the decade, Indians had obtained full political and legal rights.

Although Aboriginal people are now represented in almost every sector of the workforce, serious economic and social problems remain. Unemployment rates are high compared with rates among non-Aboriginal Canadians, and housing is still inadequate on many reserves. The First Nations, with the support of the Government of Canada, are working to address these issues.

Land Claims

There has been a significant increase in Aboriginal land claim activity over the