

Assimilation efforts

During the 1800s and into the 1900s, numerous efforts were made to assimilate Indians into the “white man’s” world. For example, the concept of “enfranchisement” was introduced, whereby Indians were encouraged to renounce their aboriginal title to land in return for the right to vote in elections. Indians were also enfranchised — with or without their consent — if they joined the clergy or the armed forces, or attended college or university. In other cases, Indian children were removed from their families and communities and placed in boarding schools, where they were forbidden to speak their native language or practice their native traditions. There were also attempts to train Indians from some tribes to be farmers, even though they and their forefathers had been hunters and fishermen for centuries.

Most efforts at assimilation failed, largely because of the indomitable spirit of Indian people and the government’s lack of understanding of Indian culture. At the same time, Indians paid a steep price socially and economically with the passing of their usefulness as military and trade allies and with the disappearance of their traditional way of life.

However, strong and forceful Indian leaders have been emerging, signalling a re-awakening of traditional Indian culture and beliefs. These leaders call for an equal place for their people in Canadian society, at the same time emphasizing their desire to remain distinct and avoid assimilation. These efforts generated widespread interest and support among the non-native public, and resulted in pressure on governments to improve the quality of life in Indian communities.

