

# WHOSE LAND IS IT ANYWAY?



## A Manual for Decolonization

Peter McFarlane & Nicole Schabus

*"I wish you a wonderful experience decolonizing yourself"*  
– Arthur Manuel –

# Decolonization is taking back our power

Pamela Palmater



*Tannis Nielsen*

Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island (what is now referred to as Canada, United States and Mexico) have experienced some of the most prolonged and violent genocidal acts in the world's history. European settlers and their colonial governments colonized Indigenous territories and peoples with such lethal force that they managed to reduce Indigenous populations by the millions. The murders of Indigenous men, women and children, and even those yet unborn, were all committed in the colonial pursuit of unearned power and wealth: the theft of lands and natural resources, and control over new trading routes. The powerful state-propagated myth that colonization was benign, well-intentioned, inevitable and in the past has not only erased from history the culpability of states for genocidal policies aimed at eliminating "Indians," but also renders invisible our collective suffering in the present. This presents a challenge for Indigenous decolonization efforts aimed at both resisting ongoing colonization and also undertaking resurgence efforts aimed at revitalizing Indigenous cultures, laws and governing systems in and on our territories.

In general, when federal, provincial and municipal governments, mainstream media, public commentators and even some educational institutions acknowledge the atrocities of colonization at all, they tend to do so as if it is a legacy – a sad chapter of Canada's past, one that can be collectively acknowledged and quickly forgotten after tearful apologies. There is an urgent political desire for Indigenous peoples to "just get over it," despite the fact that colonization continues in equally lethal ways. Today, while there are many political promises of a renewed relationship, the goal of Indigenous assimilation and integration into "Canadian society" remains as the foundation of reconciliation platitudes underlying the new partnership moving forward. Even the push to move forward hampers our ability to have the truth of Canada's genocidal legacy brought to the fore and advocate for reparations. The race to move forward is more about firmly cementing the power status quo and ensuring the economic exploitation of our territories continues uninterrupted.

Faster than we can empower ourselves, our families, communities and nations with critical information and analysis, government communication networks spin our words to suit their political agendas.

Public officials have adopted our calls for decolonization in their bid to promote more superficial forms of reconciliation like changing the names on buildings, placing our art-work on currency, or wearing clothing with Indigenous cultural designs in Parliament. Meanwhile, the crisis issues facing many Indigenous peoples that have directed resulted from historic and ongoing colonization remain unaddressed. Many First Nations have the lowest socio-economic indicators in Canada and some of the highest suicide rates in the world.

There is nothing in the reconciliation relationship that addresses these multiple overlapping crises – instead, First Nations are subjected to federally controlled and chronically underfunded social programs and services that do not increase with inflation, actual costs or population increases. Despite many alarms raised by research reports, commissions, court cases, federal officials like the Auditor General and Office of the Correctional Investigator, and United Nations human rights bodies, Canada alternates between governments that make ever deeper cuts to funding and those that make minor increases that never address actual needs.

In addition to poverty, homelessness, lack of access to education and employment, lack of access to healthcare and clean water, and higher rates of going murdered and missing, the impact of colonization on Indigenous children is especially acute. Statistically, Indigenous youth face a greater chance of being incarcerated than of getting a university education. Despite being only 4% of the population in Canada, Indigenous children are 48% of the children in foster care; 38% of all deaths in youth are from suicide, 60% of Indigenous children live in poverty, and nearly half of admissions to correctional detention centres were Indigenous youth. Indigenous children suffer twice the infant mortality rate, and higher rates of respiratory and infectious diseases, diabetes and serious injuries. Underlying all of these socio-economic conditions is the ongoing fact of land dispossession, oppression and institutionalized racism maintained and defended at all costs – financial and human – by successive Canadian governments.

One might wonder how Canada can so openly discriminate against Indigenous peoples, maintain such racist laws, or get away with not addressing the many crises that have captured the media's attention

in recent years. Their primary method has served successive governments well: deny, deflect and defer. Whenever crises hit the news, the first reaction of government is to deny the problem, its severity or the government's liability outright in the hopes that the media will drop the story – which is sometimes effective. It is for this reason that First Nations have been forced into the court system to seek redress for ongoing problems related to a wide range of issues, from the denial of treaty rights to abuses in residential schools. However, sometimes the mainstream media stays on a story and the government is then forced to try to deflect blame for the crisis to the First Nation itself. Blaming the victim is a tactic that has been effectively used by rapists, pedophiles and war criminals for decades. It has been equally effective for Canadian governments as the media then latches on to the sensational implications and allegations of crooked chiefs, abusive First Nation men and dangerous protesters instead of the actual issue at hand.

If all else fails and the media remain focused on the core issue at hand, and the government can't back out of responsibility as easily as they had hoped, then their last tactic is delay. They will defer the matter to a committee, commission, inquiry, political roundtable or research project to be addressed another day – usually when that government is no longer in power. Most reports end up collecting dust on shelves; we are left with thousands of recommendations for change that never get implemented and the issue fades from public discourse.

Public education is itself a challenge when governments go to great lengths to make their laws and programs sound like they are making great strides in addressing long-standing issues. What the public often fails to understand is that while the specific law, policy, program or initiative names may have changed over time, the government's Indian policy objectives of (1) obtaining Indigenous lands and resources and (2) reducing financial obligations to Indians incurred through treaties and other agreements have not. Their primary method of either eliminating or assimilating Indians is evidenced in even the most modern of policies. Certainly, it is arguable that the federal government's programs and policies create the conditions of life that lead to the premature deaths of Indigenous peoples and, as such, could be considered a modern-day elimination policy. It has also been argued that the federal government's maintenance of the disappearing Indian formula in the

*Indian Act* is a form of legal and political assimilation that will guarantee the legislative extinction of all Indians in Canada in time. However, assimilation tools take many forms, like the education curriculum in K-12 schools that teaches French and English language and history, the promotion of Canada as a bilingual state, and the primacy of Canadian laws. While some might argue that Canadian law protects Indigenous rights, their non-Indigenous lawyers, judges and police forces ensure that Canadian sovereignty is supreme and that any rights we have are subservient to those of the colonial regimes.

Canada works very hard to get in the way of real decolonization, as that would mean a substantive shift in power and wealth back to Indigenous peoples – something no government has yet put on the table for negotiation. This means that Indigenous peoples must engage in this exercise of decolonization in a context that is politically, socially and legally complex. What's worse is when governments are successful in creating divisions between “good Indians” and “bad Indians,” “willing partner chiefs” and “rogue chiefs.” Like all things Indigenous, decolonization should be a balance of both resistance and resurgence, where we withdraw from harmful government processes and relationships and reengage in those relationships that have sustained us for millennia – with the land, the water, our people and our cultures.

There is not one way to do this and we have to accept our people where they are in the decolonization process – some are not even thinking about it yet, while others are fully engaged in the conversation.

The hard part will be holding our own leaders to account for the role some of them play in propping up colonial governments and their processes that hurt our nations.

Dividing ourselves along male/female, traditional/non-traditional, religious/non-religious, speaker/non-speaker, and on/off reserve members only serves the interests of the colonizers – not our people or our nations. We have to forgive ourselves for being colonized and lay the blame properly at the feet of the colonizers. It is not our fault if some of us cannot speak our languages, do not live on a reserve, or were never taught how to sundance. The colonizers and missionaries taught us that we were savages and heathens and taught our children to hate themselves in residential schools.

These same messages are spread throughout our nations in more insidious forms today through government intervention and hateful media messages.

We must ensure that the decolonization process teaches our children to be critical thinkers and work towards stopping the spread of the colonial infection in our nations so that we can put more energy into our resurgence and nation-building. It won't be easy, but being the victims of modern genocidal policies is much harder. Our people have survived everything Canada has done to us. Our ancestors are walking beside us as we revitalize our cultures and identities. Decolonization is about realizing that we have power to take back what is rightfully ours and ensure a future for our future generations.

***Pamela Palmater** is from the Mi'kmaw Nation and a member of the Eel River Bar First Nation. She has been a practising lawyer for eighteen years and currently holds the Chair in Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University. Pam is an activist and was one of the spokespeople, organizers and educators for the Idle No More movement. She is a well-known media commentator and public speaker who is often called before parliamentary and United Nations committees as an expert witness on Indigenous rights. She has numerous publications including her books Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity and Indigenous Nationhood: Empowering Grassroots Citizens.*