

OPINION

An idea: read the report on Indigenous women's lives before dismissing it



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Perhaps Canada's history of legally defining, forcibly moving, purposefully starving and cruelly experimenting on Indigenous people – while suppressing their languages and outlawing their spiritual practices – already fits the existing definition of genocide.

DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Before the final report from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls came out last week, I spent some time rereading about its conception, construction and bumps along the way. I wanted to be ready for this monumental look at one of Canada's most destructive and ingrained problems, and remember the stories of the lost human lives that inspired it.

But despite my weekly deadline, I didn't intend to write about it right away. I wanted to form my own opinion carefully, while absorbing the ideas that matter most: the thoughts of Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people.

Daily reporters don't have that luxury, and although too few are Indigenous, many are smart and dedicated. The potential news stories didn't worry me. I was wary, though, of the immediate analysis: I hoped that non-Indigenous people in the public eye would be cautious, that their first takes would be the beginning of a process, not a fast hit job.

I hoped. But I wasn't surprised when that didn't happen.

People fell over themselves to seize on the report's use of the term "genocide" as a way to ignore its full scope. Media outlets are always quick to criticize each other while lauding themselves, yet voices from just about every legacy publication (including this one) lined up to deliver the same take.

So did politicians, and other prominent Canadians. In turn, and most distressingly, were everyday people. This week, the Toronto Star ran a tasteless yes-or-no poll asking, basically, “did genocide happen”? It’s been taken down, but last I looked, the majority were voting no.

I’m not going to opine on that national obsession yet, because I haven’t read the whole report, particularly the 46-page supplement on the term. Perhaps Canada’s history of legally defining, forcibly moving, purposefully starving and crudely experimenting on Indigenous people – while suppressing their languages and outlawing their spiritual practices – already fits the existing definition of genocide.

Maybe not, but both language and law are constantly evolving. Perhaps 1,200 pages outlining the gender-specific effects of both historical and contemporary child apprehension, forced sterilization, political disenfranchisement, entrenched poverty and justice-system discrimination construct a good argument for why the definition has to change.

It seems risky to dismiss the inquiry’s findings without checking to see if the questions I have are answered inside its report.

What I do have an opinion on are the reasons behind the rush to undermine those findings. Those include guilt about the undeniable cruelty and indifference with which this country treats Indigenous people.

There’s also fear about how Canadian lives might change if the government honoured the many treaties signed by this Crown and the one before it. Imagine this, though: Some things could get better. If Indigenous women were safer, other women would be, too.

Next comes the plain bad habit, practised for a century and a half, of denying the anti-Indigenous prejudice deep inside Canada’s bones. Systemic discrimination in this country is so clear, it’s almost invisible.

Laziness is in there, too. Reading these things isn’t easy. After the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on residential schools blurred before my eyes, I tried to watch a YouTube project in which Indigenous people read different sections aloud. That was stultifying, too, confirming two of my own long-held opinions.

First, that jargon, even when necessary, is a barrier to engagement. Second, one major job of journalists is to fairly and diligently interpret complicated expertise for everyone else. That's why media is targeted in one full section of the "calls to justice" in this new report which aims to save the lives of women, girls and two-spirit people. I'm going to try harder this time.

Pundits aside, the inquiry has challenged every Canadian to absorb its work. Reassuringly, there are people making social-media promises to #readtheinquiry. They, too, might start with the calls to justice for their particular industries: health, resource development, policing, hospitality. I'm opening the genocide supplement next, since it will inevitably come up in some dreary, distracting debate.

But first, I headed humbly to the kids' section, "Their Voices Will Guide Us": It's aimed at educators, and outlines age-appropriate approaches to tackling the inquiry's dark issues. It reminds us that much of this information has been purposefully kept suppressed, and so teachers and parents will often be learning alongside the young people they're working with.

Which means there's no need for defensiveness over not already knowing as much as the members of the inquiry. What does look bad is stubbornly remaining ignorant, while speaking over Indigenous voices, again.

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