

1876 The “Indian Question”

Monarch: Queen Victoria

Prime Minister: John A. Macdonald

Premier: G.A. Walkem (to Jan 1876); A.C. Elliot (from Feb 1876)

Federal Ministry: Department of the Interior

In the News

July 27, 1871 British Columbia joins Confederation.
April 12 1876 Canada: The Indian Act becomes law.
June 25 1876 USA: Battle of the Little Bighorn; Custer wiped out by Sioux and Cheyenne.
August 1876 Governor General Lord Dufferin visits BC; appeals for fair treatment of Indian claims.

Backgrounder

1876 was the year of the Indian Act. There had been various laws governing Aboriginal people since colonial times, but the act consolidated earlier legislation into one bill covering all aspects of First Nation’s lives across the country. However, it made almost no mention of education, simply commenting on the financing of schools “such as were frequented by Indians.”

It was also the year that Canada and British Columbia came to an agreement over how to deal with the land issue. With virtually no treaties made with BC First Nations, BC was different from the rest of the provinces in how reserve lands were administered. Since before BC joined Confederation in 1871, the two sides had argued over how reserve lands would be allocated. In January 1876 they agreed to set up the Joint Indian Reserve Commission, which would decide on the reserves, without any consultation with First Nations communities. This, the public believed, would solve the “Indian Question.”

As the 1876 documents show, they were basing their plan for reserves on a proposal made by William Duncan, an influential religious leader who, with members Tsimshian people, started a “model” religious community at Metlakatla, near present day Prince Rupert. In 1875 he travelled to Ottawa to present his own plan for settlement of

the land question. It advocated reserving relatively large areas for each tribal group – that is, groups speaking the same language. That would have had the effect of collecting everyone who spoke the same language into one settlement.

In practice, of course, this is not what happened. Each village or band was allocated small parcels of their traditional territories as reserves.

Also in the newspapers of 1876 there was public discussion as to what Aboriginal people were capable of understanding and learning. In some of the documents you will read some examples of the gross ignorance and racist beliefs of the time. However, you will also read a letter from a First Nations point of view.

At the same time, the public was following events in the United States, where the government was engaged in warfare against tribes that resisted that country’s controlling legislation. Some Canadians were afraid there would be similar violence in Canada if matters weren’t settled.

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The Indian Question.

The much vex't Indian question, which has been so long kept in an unsettled state through the illiberality of the Provincial Government, is at last in a fair way of settlement. This Government, after obstinately adhering to its 5-acre policy for a year and a-half, retarding settlement, and nearly precipitating all the horrors of an Indian war upon the Province, have yielded to the demands of the Dominion Government so far as to consent to the appointment of a joint Commission, before whom shall be laid the matter in dispute for settlement. The basis of the arrangement will be upon a plan proposed by Mr. Duncan of Metlakatlah, to gather each nation (meaning by nation all tribes speaking the same language) in British Columbia, and after full inquiry to fix and determine for each nation separately the number, extent and localities of the reserve or reserves to be allowed it.

Colonist Jan 18, 1876, p2

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SECOND PROVINCIAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

FIRST SESSION.

Thursday, Jan. 21st,

Mr. Speaker took the chair at 2 p.m. The Honourable Mr. Walkem moved, That the correspondence between the Dominion and Provincial Governments on Indian affairs, be immediately taken into consideration, and that this House do approve of the settlement made of this embarrassing question. In doing so he alluded to the importance of the question both with regard to the safety of life and property of settlers. He contrasted the settlement of the Indian question in the Province of Ontario, with that proposed for British Columbia, and asserted that the two countries being so dissimilar the arrangement applied to Ontario, could not possibly become the system here. He then traced the course pursued by the Dominion Government, pointing out the propositions made by them and refused by the local administration. He explained the impossibility of apportioning land to each Indian family separately, and alluded in terms of praise to the able report forwarded by Mr. Duncan of Metlakatlah both to himself and to the Minister of the Interior, stating that owing in a great measure to that gentleman's valuable information the present basis of settlement had been arrived at. The hon. gentleman here recited the several clauses which are embraced in the proposed settlement, stating that two agents would be appointed to act as arbitrators, one paid and selected by the Dominion Government the other by the Local Government and a third jointly remunerated by both parties. He believed that the basis agreed on would result satisfactorily and whilst acting beneficially to the Indians, would reserve for settlement large tracts of valuable agricultural lands. In conclusion he added that the Government desired to take no credit to itself for the settlement of this embarrassing question but desired every praise to be accorded to the energy and ability of Mr. Duncan. (Hear hear.)

Colonist Jan 21, 1876, p 3

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The Indian Question Settled.

Yesterday the House unanimously adopted the basis of an agreement for the settlement of the Indian question. The arrangement originated with Mr. Duncan of Metlakatlah, and was adopted by this and the Ottawa Governments after some obstacles, thrown in the way of the settlement by our Government, had been cleared away at Ottawa. Dr. Tolmie and Mr. Smith, whose efforts to have the difficulty settled last year were scouted by the Local Government, did not fail, yesterday, to remind the House of the shabby treatment the Committee on Indian Affairs received last year and to congratulate the Government on their change of policy. We are glad an understanding has been come to. The settlers of the interior have reposed on a slumbering volcano too long.

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4 The Occidentals

Victoria 1876

San Francisco 1874

A REMARKABLE EXHIBITION.

Capt. McDonald's Band of Trained Indians at Le Grand Armory--An Hour of Difficult Evolutions and Manœuvres--The Braves Display Great Precision, Ease and Rapidity--A Large Attendance of Visitors, and all Delighted.

A private exhibition of Capt. C. E. S. McDonald's band of trained Indians (or, rather, that portion of them hailing from British Columbia,) was given in Le Grand Armory last evening, before a large number of ladies and gentlemen, including many military men, leading citizens, and members of the Press. This was the first appearance of the Indians before an audience, and was designed by Capt. McDonald to show the progress they have already made in study and exercise, those exhibiting having been in training but a little over two months.

WHO THEY ARE.

The Indians who were drilled last night were the following:

"Jake," a representative of the Indian nations extending over and occupying the northern part of Oregon, and the southern portion of Washington Territory.

"Joe," a representative of the Indians inhabiting the northwestern coast of Vancouver's Island.

"Archib," a representative of the tribes around "Nootkah." This place is rendered of historical interest as being the spot where Captain Cook landed on his first voyage of discovery to the Northern Coast of America.

"Charley," a representative of the various tribes inhabiting Queen Charlotte's Island and the islands adjacent to Alaska.

"Modoc Charley," one of the Modoc tribe of Indians.

"Bill," a representative of the tribes inhabiting the southern portion of Alaska Territory.

"John," a representative of the tribe called the "Simahelms," inhabiting the greater part of the northwestern portion of British Columbia. These were formerly one of the most powerful nations of the Northwest, numbering at one time over 10,000 warriors.

"George" and "William," representatives of the "Nees" tribe of Indians inhabiting the country adjacent to and bordering on Alaska Territory.

Besides these, there are four more, representing the tribes of the Pawnee, Comanche, Sioux and the Blackfeet, who, having been here but two weeks, were not sufficiently advanced to appear in this exhibition.

THE EXHIBITION.

At about eight o'clock, Captain McDonald entered the hall, followed by the Indians, marching in double file, and at once the drill was begun, continuing for about an hour. The Indians were put through all the evolutions of Captain McDonald's drill, which have been made familiar to our citizens by the San Francisco Cadets.

A GREAT SUCCESS.

Many of the situations and groupings were very picturesque, while the ease and rapidity with which the natives of the forest handled their pieces, executing the most difficult manœuvres and combinations with almost the precision of clock-work, elicited hearty and well-merited applause from the spectators.

The band is composed of lithe, active young men, representing various tribes of our Northern and Western frontier. The detachment exhibiting last evening consists of representatives of those tribes inhabiting portions of Oregon, Washington Territory, Vancouver and Queen Charlotte's Island, British Columbia and Alaska, and were selected expressly for Captain McDonald by Colonel Powell, Indian Agent for the British Government, residing

at Victoria. When brought to this city, some three months since, they were totally undisciplined in the use of arms and ignorant of the English language. They have been drilled entirely by rule, executing all their movements simply by the blow of a whistle. Their dress is showy, but neat and picturesque, partaking of the Indian characteristic. Captain McDonald's success in thus accomplishing a task that has been heretofore pronounced by military critics and Indian Agents an impossible one, stamps him as a remarkable man.

The Captain says that if given charge of an Indian Reservation, he could make the Indians thereon equal in the manual of arms to any regiment.

THE OBJECT.

Captain McDonald holds that the same system which has brought to such perfection this handful of Indians, can be carried out on a more extended scale, and that large bodies may be trained to move as one man. He regards the subject as one of great importance, worthy the attention of the Government and people. He intends to go on and perfect them in the drill, and to exhibit them in the Eastern and Western cities, so as to bring the matter to the immediate attention of military and civic officials and of the people at large. We understand the Captain will also present them at Philadelphia, to represent California at the coming Centennial, when this spark from the West will doubtless kindle a flame of enthusiasm among our Eastern brethren.

A BENEFIT SUGGESTED.

Some of our prominent citizens are desirous that a benefit should be tendered to the novel organization, and a time will no doubt soon be named. The public will then have an opportunity of witnessing the remarkable proficiency of these red men in the science of arms.

THE "OCCIDENTALS."—Capt. McDonald's company of braves are called the Occidentals. They are training at Redwood City a few miles from San Francisco. The editor of the local paper recently visited their camp, and says this of them: "The company represents nine different tribes, being composed of four squaws and five men. All of them are the best specimens of the children of the forest. Capt. McDonald put them through a series of manœuvres in the Lightning Drill, which they executed so rapidly at the tap of a drum that the eye could scarcely follow them; so beautiful and stirring in their effect and picturesque positions that we were taken by surprise. The Indians were drilled in marching, wheeling, bayonet exercise, skirmishing, receiving cavalry, rolling and manual of arms. The men and women throughout the exercise acted like automatons and gave the highest satisfaction for the precision and ready execution of their movements. After the drill Capt. McDonald put the Indians through sixteen different pyramids, forming the most picturesque positions with the agility of old professional acrobats. After the pyramids the Indians went through an Indian war dance, which both squaws and men executed in their savage-like manner. After the war dance came the Indian Feast of Fire, which consists of eating fire, drinking burning naphtha, devouring burning torches, breathing smoke and fire, and pulling long poles from their mouths. 'Twas one of the most startling performances we ever witnessed. When the fire feast was over the Indians took their places and executed a grand ribbon dance, pulling a number of yards of different colored ribbons from each other's mouths during the dance. There seemed to be no end to the quantity of ribbons they took from their mouths, and where it all came from we cannot surmise. Their costumes are among the most gorgeous that have ever been seen on any stage. Capt. McDonald has spared no expense to make his company of Indians the shining stars of the world, and he deserves credit for having succeeded so well in so short a time with such new and raw material. We were fairly charmed with the precision of all their motions, their strict attention and their clock-like movements. The performance lasted over two hours."

Colonist Jan 19, 1876 p2

Daily Alta California, San Francisco,
Dec 19, 1874, p1

5 Our Indians and Christianity.

EDITOR COLONIST:—His Excellency Lieut.-Governor Trutch in a letter on Indian Affairs makes the following remarks: "In my 20 years' experience among the aborigines of this coast I have not met with a single Indian of pure blood whom I consider to have attained to even the most glimmering perception of the Creed." Dr. Tolmie, in his speech on the Indian question, confirms the preceding statement by declaring that in a still wider intercourse of 42 years his experience has been to the same effect.

These are grave statements, opposed to the general experience, yet carrying weight, owing to the quarter from which they emanate, and I would not attempt to throw the least doubt upon the veracity of their authors. But while their experience may be such as they allege, the inference erroneous and wider than the facts would justify, is fairly implied and might be readily drawn, that there are no Indians on this coast believing and preaching the doctrines of Christianity.

The results of missionary efforts have been in many cases greatly exaggerated, but they have quite as often been unduly depreciated, and I cannot but think that the observations of His Excellency and Dr. Tolmie are exceptional in their character. Coming as they do from such sources statements of this nature suggest the broader construction that their experience is the experience of all.

That it correctly represents the spiritual condition of the Indians, I have the best reasons in the world for doubting. With a much briefer acquaintance with our aboriginal brothers, I have on several occasions met with pure Indians who were at the same time consistent Christians and eloquent expounders of Gospel Truth. Such an experience on my part does not at all invalidate a contrary experience on the part of others. It ought, however, to modify the conclusions we draw; it shows what different facts may present themselves to different minds in the same field of observation, and how carefully the public ought to be on their guard against sweeping assertions founded on an incomplete array of facts.

Whatever has been done for the moral and intellectual elevation of the Indian has been done mainly through the self-sacrificing zeal of missionaries, and to them the credit is chiefly due and not to any Governmental aid however generous. That in some cases the efforts made have yielded abundant fruit is matter of observation and congratulation, that in others the results have been meagre indeed is a source of deep regret, but considering the want of means, helpers and other conditions of success, not at all wonderful.

A discerning public will have no difficulty in deciding for itself what is the true condition of affairs among the Indians as regards Christianity. In the estimate of any enterprise two tendencies may be noticed, that of excessive laudation or of equally excessive depreciation. The partizans of each view range themselves at the opposite poles of thought, thundering back the eternal "No" to the equally thunderous eternal "Yes!" Occupying the middle ground, I think the proper summing up of the case is as follows: Missionary work has been neither as successful nor abortive as extremists would make it out to be.

In conclusion I have to say that an experience of 20 or 40 years may or may not be worthy of our assent according as it has or has not been the result of careful observation. If it be merely an opinion grounded on no special examination and recording the impression derived from mere surface-contact, it has no value beyond that

of an 'ipse dixit.' But if it be the deliberate statement of a man, whose investigation has been thorough and his information large, who has gone below the surface of things, who has put himself in close contact with his subject, and who has not by hearsay, but by personal inquiry, satisfied himself as to the acquaintance of the Indians with the articles of Christian belief, then the experience of such a man must carry the greatest weight. Whether this weight should be accorded to the statements at the opening of this letter, and whether the therein recorded experience is not overborne by other experiences of a totally different character, I leave to the public to judge.

CIVILIZATION.

Colonist Jan 23, 1876, p3

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OUR INDIANS AND CHRISTIANITY.—The remark of Lieut. Governor Trutch referred to by our correspondent "Civilization," in his letter under the above heading in our issue of the 23rd instant, is extracted from a passage in a dispatch addressed by His Honour to the Secretary of State for the Provinces on the 26th September, 1871, which has been published among the "papers connected with the Indian Land Question" recently laid before the House of Assembly. The full text of that passage is as follows: "8. The strongest motives of duty and interest combine to press upon the government, as upon each honest individual member of our community, the urgency of our striving by every means in our power to advance the material and moral condition of our Indian population. By such influence may we hope so to change their habit of mind that in a following generation they may become susceptible of appreciating the truths of revealed religion; although, and I state it most regretfully, in my twenty years experience among the aborigines of this coast I have not yet met with a single Indian of pure blood, whom I consider to have attained to even the most glimmering perception of the Christian creed. In fact the idiosyncrasy of the Indians of this country appears to incapacitate them from appreciating any abstract idea, nor do their languages contain words by which such a conception could be expressed."

FROM THE SOUND.—The steamer North Pacific arrived at 3 p. m. yesterday from Puget Sound with a small mail, 17 tons of freight, six head cattle and the following passengers: Messrs. John Nation, Isaac Springer, A. Scott, T. Osgood, T. McCafferty, D. Watts, Lewis and wife, Burk, Warren, Nicholson, Gray, Campbell, Sykes, Wilson, Sweeney, Tibbals, 13 Indians and 5 Chinamen.

Colonist Jan 25, 1876, p3

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The Indian Question.

EDITOR COLONIST:—Having read by chance the papers on the Indian question I came to the conclusion that everyone therein concerned must sincerely desire to see that question, on which depends the peace, tranquility and, in a great measure, the prosperity of this Province, ultimately and promptly settled. Allow me to make some remarks on this important question. Will the last arrangement proposed and accepted by the Dominion and Local Governments, both of whom no doubt have at heart the solution of this grave and difficult problem, have, as its result, a cordial and durable understanding between the honorable Commissioners and the Indians of this Province? I would wish to give an affirmative answer, for in theory and on paper, nothing appears more easy and advantageous than to locate the Indians on general reserves. This system seems to be simple and clear; it would at least, have the advantage of saving the agents and missionaries journeys, which in bad weather are far from being agreeable, and of affording, in a certain sense, more facilities for civilizing and instructing the Indians. But is this system, so apparently simple and clear, practicable? And will it satisfy the Indians? This is the question. Mr. Duncan does not seem to have entire confidence in this system proposed by himself; he admits that it might result in serious evils if acted upon with too much precipitation. In an affair of such great importance to the future peace and prosperity of the Province it is, above all, necessary to be guided by principles suggested by a true and impartial consideration of the question. To act with frankness and loyalty is, in my opinion, the best means to come to a lasting and cordial understanding. Fearing that I might be misunderstood I beg to state that I am not opposed in practice to the nations speaking the same language being located on one or several reserves. For more than thirty years during which the Catholic missionaries have been laboring in this wild country, they have learned by experience the amount of labor and suffering it has cost them to run after the wandering Indians, consequently it would be rendering them a great service to locate the Indians in large numbers on reserves. But, I ask once more, is it practicable? This system, so far from satisfying the Indians of this Province, would it not rather make them more discontented than heretofore? Some say the system of tribal reserves is a mistake and fraught with bad consequences. Others maintain and endeavor to prove that tribal reserves is by far the best way to settle the Indian difficulty. It is certain that the system of tribal reserves has been recommended by the Imperial Government and adopted by Sir James Douglas, who is better acquainted with Indian character than many others. No doubt tribal reserves may have inconveniences, but who

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LETTER FROM A TRAINED INDIAN.

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 24, 1876.
To Mr. W. Higgins,
Editor of BARNES COLONIST.

DEAR SIR.—You will excuse the liberty I take in writing you a few lines, but I am prompted to do so from what I have read of the Governor and others in your valuable paper concerning the Indians.

I am a poor Indian Boy. I was raised in Victoria and taught to love my race and obey the Queen, which I have always done, and my love for my race will never cease. To about

I felt very sorry when I read an article published in your paper headed *Indian Christians*, written by His Excellency The Governor, and using Doctor Tolme for authority. His Excellency said: *That the Indians were ignorant of what they worship, and that they did not know what they went to church for.*

In reply I will state while I lived in Victoria I attended church and school regular. I went to worship and believe in God, which I do, and every other Indian who attended church believes the same, and taught to worship and believe in God by good Christainable, Honest Teachers.

Does his Excellency and Doctor Tolme know more of God than I.—*Echo.—Answer.*

I am aware that his Excellency is compelled to be taught Sunday after Sunday by a Borrowing Bishop, of a Borrowing Church, to believe in some kind of a God. If his Excellency is taught to believe in the same God as I have been taught to believe in, and worship, then he knows no more about religion than I do. I firmly believe that his Excellency cannot define what God is, or what created God; if his Excellency does, then he will know more than I, or the Teachers who taught me. Can his tutor, that Borrowing Bishop of a Borrowing Church, throw any light upon this question?

will be able to prove that the national reserve system will not have far greater difficulties? This the honorable Commissioners will soon have an opportunity of finding out. For my part, after more than twenty years experience and knowledge of the Indian character and their customs, I have no hesitation in stating that, with few exceptions, the national reserve system will be ultimately found altogether impracticable. To force the Indians to quit their villages against their will would not only be unjust but impolitic to the last degree. It would be imprudently exposing the country to all the horrors of war, lately experienced by our American neighbors for the very same thing, namely, for having endeavored to force the Indians on general reserves. Mr. Duncan, no doubt is not aware of what has happened to our next-door neighbors, if he were, or had witnessed it, his natural good sense and kind feelings would compel him not to even think of, much less propose, a system that could lead to the same awful consequences. A CATHOLIC PRIEST.

Colonist Jan 30, 1876

His Excellency referred in his letter to one Doctor Tolme who is supposed to be a church member of good standing, no doubt he may be considered a good church member by many, but not by me. * * * * The only thing I am sorry for is that his Excellency had not another authority like Doctor Tolme, then there would have been a Trinity of his Excellency's Christain make up. A Trinity of that kind would be more easy to understand by his Excellency than the Trinity that the Scriptures make mention of. The latter Trinity I was taught by that good Christain Minister Mr. Pollard. [Pollard.]

There is several Indians, that have been born and raised in Victoria, who have received a good education. What I am surprised at is not why they did not answer the Governors letter. Probly the Educated Indians had not spirit enough to reply. Or else the love for the downtrodden race they sprung from has long since faded away, and sheer puppyism has taken deep root in their littleness.

I also read another Article, that their is a movement on foot to dispossess the Indians of their land, and move them farther away.

I would like to ask why a stranger in the Country the same as his Excellency is who has not benefited the Whites or Indians, would sanction such a movement. Does his Excellency wish to create a war with the few remaining tribes in the fond hopes of exterminating them? No doubt he does, in all probabilities his love for the Red man is oppression, taught him by Doctor Tolme and that Borrowing Bishop of a Borrowing Church.

I am a member of Captain McDonalds Trained Indians, and I intend to visit England next July and will perform before his Superior's the Queen of England, and may have the honor of making mention of his Excellency's name to the Queen Personally. Since I have joined Captain McDonald's Band, I have seen some of the world, and learned to speak my mind to all men both high and low, and I look upon his Excellency no better than what I am—or no worse.

Mr. Higgins I have now concluded my letter and hope that you will give it room in your valuable paper, if you see anything libel on Doctor Tolme, you can alter it some. This is my own composition, and I wish to show all of my friends that I have not forgotten them although so far away, also my Christain Friends how I have improved in my studies since I have been with Captain McDonald. Please send twelve copys of the paper, also the account if any for publishing this letter.

I Remain Respectfully Yours,
JOHN SMITH.

Colonist Mar 5, 1876