

Leah Gazan's motion on the Genocide of Aboriginals *

By Jacques Rouillard, Emeritus Professor
Department of History, University of Montreal

On October 27, 2022, Leah Gazan, M.P., put forward a motion that was unanimously supported in the House of Commons calling on the federal government to recognize the genocidal nature of Indian Residential Schools (IRS). Did all MPs really believe that the Canadian government and the religious communities that managed most of the schools set out to destroy Indigenous children?

In a text written later, Gazan explained that her intent was to “achieve real reconciliation in this country” that cannot be achieved without truth.¹ We agree with her purpose, and we are also trying to bring truth to this situation.

Gazan seems to believe that “every part of the definition” of genocide, according to the UN Convention of the Crime of Genocide, applies to Indian Residential Schools (IRS): killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. The actions of the Canadian government and church leaders, Gazan wrote, were consistent with this definition and clearly expressed intent “to destroy Indigenous peoples.”

But the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Final Report in 2015 clearly dismisses, in its introduction, the idea of physical and biological genocide of Aboriginal people. Instead, it claims that cultural genocide took place. Cultural genocide “is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue to live as a group” while physical genocide is “the mass killing of the members of a targeted group.”² The Commission's view is closer to the idea of assimilation into the Canadian society than to the destruction of Aboriginal peoples.

On the 70th anniversary of the Genocide Convention in 2018, the UN clarified the meaning of genocide by stating that genocide is “a proven intent by the perpetrators to physically destroy a national, ethnic, racial or

* This text was first published in French: Jacques Rouillard, La volonté d'assimilation des enfants autochtones n'en fait pas nécessairement un génocide,” *Presse-toi à gauche*, 28 novembre 2022. We have added more explanations and sources. I thank Shannon Lee Mannion and Rodney Clifton for helping me translate this text.

¹ Leah Gazan, “There is no reconciliation without the truth,” *rabble.ca*, November 7, 2022. <https://rabble.ca/indigenous/house-of-commons-recognizes-residential-schools-as-genocide/>

² The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future. Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 2015, p. 1.

religious group." "Cultural destruction," the text states, "is not sufficient, nor is the intention to simply disperse a group."³

The distinction between physical and cultural genocide was, in fact, debated in the UN General Assembly in 1948. Because of the objection of several nations, the term cultural genocide was not used in the UN Genocide Convention, nor in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 1994.⁴ That is probably why the TRC Report distinguished between physical and cultural genocide, and uses cultural genocide to explain what happened in the IRS system.

The policies of the Canadian government and the church s that managed most of the schools were clearly aimed at assimilating Aboriginal peoples into Canadian society. University of Saskatchewan professor emeritus and 2010 Canada Research Council Gold Medal recipient, J. R. Miller, who has dedicated thirty years of his career to examining the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people wrote in the *National Post* (January 2021) that "the government's goal was assimilation, not extermination." He has also written that "no Canadian government's statements or unpublished government documents have ever been produced that contain evidence of an intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." He rightly added "if Canada had wanted to destroy First Nations, it would not have spent so much effort trying to turn them into Euro-Canadians."⁵

MP Leah Gazan's Motion

In support of physical genocide against Indigenous people, Leah Gazan refers to the 200 unmarked graves found near the Kamloops Residential School in the spring of 2021 as evidence. But it is clear that no bodies of IRS children were discovered.

In fact, Anthropologist Sarah Beaulieu surveyed the ground with ground-penetrating radar, and found a number of "disturbances" which she claimed were "probable burials." She stated that she is unsure if they are children's bodies without a "forensic investigation after excavation." The press release of the Kamloops Band reiterated the same view: "definitive results come from forensic investigation with excavation."⁶ Unfortunately, the Kamloops Band Council refuses to release the Beaulieu report or to conduct excavations.

³ United Nations Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Appeal-Ratification-Genocide-FactSheet-FR.PDF>

⁴ The definition of genocide "Generally speaking, therefore, the law of genocide is not concerned with cultural, economic, educational, linguistic, and political or social continuity. These concerns are protected elsewhere, by laws pertaining to human rights and minority rights." "Forcing transfer," *Encyclopedia.com* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/forcible-transfer> As Michael Ignatieff, mention, the term genocide has fallen victim to "a sort of verbal inflation" so it has come to be used as a "validation of every kind of victimhood". "How do you define genocide?" *BBC News*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-11108059>

⁵ J. R. Miller, "Genocide, Macdonald and Canadian history," *National Post*, January 08, 2021.

⁶ Tk'emlúps te secwépemc, Press Release, "Kamloops Indian Residential School missing children findings but a fraction of investigation and work need to bring peace to families and communities," July 15, 2021; Jana G. Pruden and Mike Hager, "Anthropologist explains how she concluded 200 children were buried at the Kamloops Residential School," *Globe and Mail*, Jul. 15, 2021; Michael Potestio, "Number of probable graves near former residential school pegged at 200," *Kamloops.This Week*, Jul 16, 2021; The whole July 15 press conference can be found on YouTube: *B.C. First Nation releases report on unmarked graves discovered in Kamloops*, July 15, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDMXXzIVcgE>. The part where Sarah Beaulieu makes her presentation can be found at: *CTV News*, Vancouver. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=2242306>

The MP also reported that there had been “new discoveries” by ground penetrating-radar close to many other residential schools that would, if true, confirm her claim of genocide. But again, only disturbances have been found in the soil, and no bodies of children have been exhumed.

However, when graves have been found close to some residential schools, they were in cemeteries well known where both adults and children were buried. That is surely the case with the 751 graves found in the cemetery near the Marieval Residential School in Saskatchewan.⁷ This cemetery includes also the graves of nuns.

In this matter, Leah Gazan should ask the government to explain why the RCMP is not involved in the search for who committed these crimes. Surely, those people who were involved in this horrific crime, and those who covered up the evidence, should be charged, tried, convicted, and punished.

The Pope Involvement

Leah Gazan explained that one of the facts that sparked her motion was the admission of genocide by the Pope. The head of the Catholic Church, she argues, is deeply concerned because the Church administered 70% of all residential schools. The argument of the Pope's admission of genocide had a very significant effect on MPs as Leah Gazan did not receive unanimous approval from MPs when she introduced a similar motion in June 2021.

Let see what the Pope actually said to a *Canadian Press* reporter as he flew back to Rome. He was asked a sneaky question that began with these words: “You know that the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) described the residential school system as a 'cultural genocide,' and then [...] was modified as genocide.” In fact, the TRC never revised the meaning of cultural genocide to genocide.

The Pope gave the following answer: “[...] but I described the genocide and asked for forgiveness, pardon for this activity that is genocidal. For example, I condemned this too: taking away children, changing culture, changing mentality, changing traditions, changing a race, let's put it that way, an entire culture. Yes, genocide is a technical word. I didn't use it because it didn't come to my mind, but I described it [...].”⁸

It is clear that his description refers to “cultural genocide,” and has nothing to do with “physical genocide.” The Pope's speeches on Canadian soil never mentioned that the Catholic Church contributed to the elimination of the Aboriginal people. Several Indigenous leaders have, nevertheless, criticized him for this oversight. But how could he have accepted the claim that Catholic clerics and nuns committed such a horrible crime without evidence?

By asking a question suggesting that cultural genocide is no longer accepted, the journalist was paving the way for the Pope to agree with the claim that Indigenous people were physically destroyed. In the news's reports, some Canadian newspapers linked the Pope's response to cultural genocide, but others, including the CBC,

⁷ Jorge Barrera, “Catholic register, survivors offer clues to who may be buried in cemetery next to Marieval residential school,” *CBC News*, Jul 20, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/marieval-cemetery-graves-1.6106563>

⁸ “Pope Francis: It was a genocide against indigenous peoples,” *Vatican News*, 30 July, 2022.

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-07/pope-francis-apostolic-journey-inflight-press-conference-canada.html>

ignored these clarifications and accepted that the Pope was referring to genocide committed in Canada.⁹

The idea of excluding the word “cultural” came from Aboriginal leaders after the alleged discovery of graves in Kamloops. And this is what Leah Gazan and all House of Commons MP agreed to without debate.

MPs unanimously approved that the plight of Aboriginal peoples in Canada equated with the most horrible crime of humanity. In passing this motion, the MPs seemed not to have realized that they have added the genocide of Aboriginal people in Canada to the eight genocides officially recognized by the Canadian government in June 2021: the Holocaust, and the genocide of Armenians, Rwandan, Uyghur, the Srebrenica massacre, etc.¹⁰

How can the Canadian government now condemn the Chinese government for its abuse of Uyghurs when MPs have admitted that Canada has its own genocide?

The motion passed stems from a false report of 215 children's bodies buried in Kamloops without any concrete evidence that this claim is true. Unfortunate, this story endorsed by the Canadian government made headlines around the world soiling Canada's reputation.

What an incredible story coming from the alleged “disturbances” on the soil of a boarding school!

About the author

Jacques Rouillard is a retired historian from the University of Montreal. He lives in Montreal and has published numerous books and articles on Canadian and Quebec history. He continues to do research and write on the relationship between Indigenous people, the Churches, and Canadian society.

⁹ In her written report, the Canadian Presse reporter, Brittany Hobson, who asked the question on the plane, mentioned that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its report referred to residential schools as a form of cultural genocide in 2015. “But since then a number of Indigenous groups have amended this to say it was genocide Ka’nhensi:io Deer, “Pope says genocide took place at Canada's residential schools,” *CBC News*, July 30, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/pope-francis-residential-schools-genocide-1.6537203>; Jason Horowitz, “Francis Calls Abuse of Indigenous People in Canada a ‘Genocide’,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/30/world/americas/pope-francis-canada-genocide.html>; Nicole Winfield, “Pope: Canadian residential schools were cultural ‘genocide’,” *The Associated Press*, *Toronto Star*, July 30, 2022. <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2022/07/30/pope-canadian-residential-schools-were-cultural-genocide.html>; By Staff, “Pope should’ve acknowledged genocide during Canada visit, Indigenous leaders say,” *The Canadian Press*, August 2, 2022. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9030453/pope-francis-residential-schools-genocide/>

¹⁰ Genocide recognition politics, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide_recognition_politics#Canada