An overview of government policies for the operation of Native residential schools in Canada between the years 1879 to 1995

(1995 draft)

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Residential Schools

In the first few decades of the life of the new Canadian nation, when the government turned to address the constitutional responsibility for Indians and their lands assigned by the Constitution Act, 1867, it adopted a policy of assimilation.[1] As described in the previous chapter, the roots of this policy were in the pre-Confederation period. It was a policy designed to move communities, and eventually all Aboriginal peoples, from their helpless 'savage' state to one of self-reliant 'civilization' and thus to make in Canada but one community – a non-Aboriginal, Christian one.[2]

Of all the steps taken to achieve that goal, none was more obviously a creature of Canada's paternalism toward Aboriginal people, its civilizing strategy and its stern assimilative determination than education. In the mind of Duncan Campbell Scott, the most influential senior official in the department of Indian affairs in the first three decades of the twentieth century, education was "by far the most important of the many subdivisions of the most complicated Indian problem".[3] As a potential solution to that 'problem', education held the greatest promise. It would, the minister of Indian affairs, Frank Oliver, predicted in 1908, "elevate the Indian from his condition of savagery" and "make him a self-supporting member of the state, and eventually a citizen in good standing."[4]

It was not, however, just any model of education that carried such promise. In 1879, Sir John A. Macdonald's government, pressured by the Catholic and Methodist churches to fulfil the education clauses of the recently negotiated western treaties,[5] had assigned Nicholas Flood Davin the task of reporting "on the working of Industrial Schools...in the United States and on the advisability of establishing similar institutions in the North-West Territories of the Dominion." Having toured U.S. schools and consulted with the U.S. commissioner of Indian affairs and "the leading men, clerical and lay who could speak with authority on the subject" in western Canada, Davin called for the "application of the principle of industrial boarding schools" – off-reserve schools that would teach the arts, crafts and industrial skills of a modern economy. Children, he advised, should be removed from their homes, as "the influence of the wigwam was stronger than that of the [day] school", and be "kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions" – the residential school – where they would receive the "care of a mother" and an education that would fit them for a life in a modernizing Canada.[6]

Davin's report received the unqualified support of the churches and the department, with the latter going so far as to suggest that within the wide range of assimilative policies, it would be through residential education, more than any other method, that "the solution of that problem, designated 'the Indian question' would probably be effected...".[7]

Politician, civil servant and, perhaps most critically, priest and parson all felt that in developing the residential school system they were responding not only to a constitutional but to a Christian "obligation to our Indian brethren" that could be discharged only "through the medium of the children" and "therefore education must be given the foremost place".[8]

At the same moment, however, they were driven by more prosaic motives. Macdonald's deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs, L. Vankoughnet, assured him that Indian expenditures were "a good investment", for in due course Aboriginal people, "instead of being supported from the revenue of the country...would contribute largely to the same."[9]

The socializing power of education had a similarly self-serving utility. Schools were part of a network of institutions that were to minister to industrial society's need for order, lawfulness, labour and security of property.[10] Scott admitted frankly that the provision of education to Indian communities was indispensable, for without it and "with neglect", they "would produce an undesirable and often dangerous element in society."[11]

Residential schools were more than a component in the apparatus of social construction and control. They were part of the process of nation building and the concomitant marginalization of Aboriginal communities. The department's inspector of education wrote in 1900 that the education of Aboriginal people in frontier districts was an important consideration,

> not only as an economical measure to be demanded for the welfare of the country and the Indians, themselves, but in order that crime may not spring up and peaceful conditions be disturbed as that element which is the forerunner and companion of civilization penetrates the country and comes into close contact with the natives. That benefit will accrue to both the industrial occupants of the country covered by treaty and to the Indians by weaning a number from the chase and inclining them to industrial pursuits is patent to those who see [that] a growing need of intelligent labour must occur as development takes place.[12]

The Aboriginal leader George Manuel, a residential school graduate, was rather more blunt. The schools, he wrote,

> were the laboratory and production line of the colonial system...the colonial system that was designed to make room for European expansion into a vast empty wilderness needed an Indian population that it could describe as lazy and shiftless...the colonial system required such an Indian for casual labour...[13]

Selfless Christian duty and self-interested statecraft were the foundations of the residential school system. The edifice itself was erected by a church/government partnership that would manage the system jointly until 1969. In this task the churches – Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian – led the way. Indeed, their energetic proselytizing resulted in the opening of residential schools in Ontario, the north-west and British Columbia even before the Davin report was submitted in 1879. Thereafter, the system – a combination of boarding schools built close to or in reserve communities and Davin's centrally located industrial schools – was expanded rapidly, reaching a high point with 80 schools in 1931 (see Table 10.1) and growing again in the 1950s as part of the nation's post-war expansion into Inuit homelands. It was maintained until the mid-1980s. Schools were built in every province and territory except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland.[14] They registered children from every Aboriginal culture – Indian, Inuit, and Métis children too – though the federal government assumed no constitutional responsibility for Métis people.[15] While Métis children would be invisible, rarely mentioned in the records, they were nevertheless there and were treated the same as all the children were.

Put simply, the residential school system was an attempt by successive governments to determine the fate of Aboriginal people in Canada by appropriating and reshaping their future in the form of thousands of children who were removed from their homes and communities and placed in the care of strangers. Those strangers, the teachers and staff, were, according to Hayter Reed, a senior member of the department in the 1890s, to employ "every effort...against anything calculated to keep fresh in the memories of the children habits and associations which it is one of the main objects of industrial education to obliterate."[16] Marching out from the schools, the children, effectively re-socialized, imbued with the values of European culture, would be the vanguard of a magnificent metamorphosis: the 'savage' was to be made 'civilized', made fit to take up the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

Tragically, the future that was created is now a lamentable heritage for those children and the generations that came after, for Aboriginal communities and, indeed, for all Canadians. The school system's concerted campaign "to obliterate" those "habits and associations", Aboriginal languages, traditions and beliefs, and its vision of radical re-socialization, were compounded by mismanagement and underfunding, the provision of inferior educational services and the woeful mistreatment, neglect and abuse of many children – facts that were known to the department and the churches throughout the history of the school system.

In the course of that history there were those who understood that such a terrible legacy was being created. In 1943, R. Hoey, the department's superintendent of welfare and training, on receiving from the principal of St. George's School (located on the Fraser River, just north of Lyttons, B.C.) a set of shackles that had been used routinely "to chain runaways to the bed" and reports of other abuses at the school, wrote, "I can understand now why there appears to be such a widespread prejudice on the part of the Indians against residential schools. Such memories do not fade out of the human consciousness very rapidly."[17] Nevertheless, with very few exceptions, neither senior departmental officials nor churchmen nor members of Parliament raised their voices against the assumptions that underlay the system or its abusive character. And, of course, the memory did not and has not faded. It has persisted, festered and become a sorrowful monument, still casting a deep shadow over the lives of many Aboriginal people and communities and over the possibility of a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

1. The Vision and Policies of Residential School Education

1.1 The Vision

> ...it is to the young that we must look for a complete change of condition.[18]

The tragic legacy of residential education began in the late nineteenth century with a three-part vision of education in the service of assimilation. It included, first, a justification for removing children from their communities and disrupting Aboriginal families; second, a precise pedagogy for re-socializing children in the schools; and third, schemes for integrating graduates into the non-Aboriginal world.

The vision sprang from and was shaped and sustained by the representations of departmental officials and churchmen of the character, circumstances and destiny of the nation's Aboriginal population. For such social reformers in Canada, and indeed throughout the world of European empires, the contact between expansive and 'mature' non-Aboriginal culture and indigenous cultures in their 'infancy' imperilled the survival of Aboriginal peoples. According to an 1886 report from the department's inspector of schools for the north-west, for example, resource development and settlement had prevented Indian communities from

> following that course of evolution which has produced from the barbarian of the past the civilized man of today. It is not possible for him to be allowed slowly to pass through successive stages, from pastoral to an agricultural life and from an agricultural one, to one of manufacturing, commerce or trade as we have done. He has been called upon suddenly and without warning to enter upon a new existence.[19]

The need for government intervention to liberate these savage people from the retrograde influence of a culture that could not cope with rapidly changing circumstances was pressing and obvious. Without it, the inspector continued, the Indian "must have failed and perished miserably and he would have died hard entailing expense and disgrace upon the Country." The exact point of intervention that would "force a change in [the Indian's] condition" was equally clear – "it is to the young that we must look for a complete change of condition."

Only in the children could hope for the future reside, for only children could undergo "the transformation from the natural condition to that of civilization".[20] Adults could not join the march of progress. They could not be emancipated from their "present state of ignorance, superstition and helplessness";[21] they were "physically, mentally and morally...unfitted to bear such a complete metamorphosis".[22] Under departmental tutelage, adults might make some slight advance. They could, Davin suggested, "be taught to do a little at farming and at stock raising and to dress in a more civilized fashion, but that is all."[23] They were, in the words of the Reverend E.F. Wilson, founder of the Shingwauk residential school, "the old unimprovable people."[24]

The central difficulty in this analysis was not that adults were lost to civilization, but that they were an impediment to it. While they could not learn, they could, as parents, teach their children. Through them to their children and on through successive generations ran the "influence of the wigwam". If the children's potential was to be realized, it could only be outside the family. As E. Dewdney, superintendent general of Indian affairs in Macdonald's second government, reasoned, children therefore had to be removed from "deleterious home influences";[25] they must be, the Archbishop of St. Boniface added, "caught young to be saved from what is on the whole the degenerating influence of their home environment."[26] Their parents were, by the light of the vision's compelling logic, unfit. Only Frank Oliver demurred, pointing out the essentially un-Christian implication of this formative conclusion:

> I hope you will excuse me for so speaking but one of the most important commandments laid upon the human by the divine is love and respect by children for parents. It seems strange that in the name of religion a system of education should have been instituted, the foundation principle of which not only ignored but contradicted this command.[27]

No one took any notice of the minister, however, for no one involved in Indian affairs doubted for a moment that separation was justified and necessary and that residential schools were therefore indispensable. Such institutions would, Parliament had been informed in 1889, undoubtedly reclaim the child "from the uncivilized state in which he has been brought up" by bringing "him into contact from day to day with all that tends to effect a change in his views and habits of life."[28] In its enthusiasm for the schools, the department went so far as to suggest that it would be "highly desirable, if it were practicable, to obtain entire possession of all Indian children after they attain to the age of seven or eight years, and keep them at schools...until they have had a thorough course of instruction".[29]

The common wisdom of the day that animated the educational plans of church and state was that Aboriginal children had to be rescued from their "evil surroundings", isolated from parents, family and community,[30] and "kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions".[31] There, through a purposeful course of instruction that Vankoughnet described as "persistent" tuition,[32] a great transformation would be wrought in the children. By a curriculum aimed at radical cultural change – the second critical element of the vision – the 'savage' child would surely be re-made into the 'civilized' adult.

The school, as department and church officials conceived it, was a circle, an all-encompassing environment of re-socialization with a curriculum that comprised not only academic and practical training but the whole life of the child in the school. This constituted the basic design of the schools and was maintained, with little variation, for most of the history of the system.

The classroom work of the teachers and students was to be guided by the standard provincial curriculum. To this was added equally important training in practical skills. The department held firm to Davin's industrial model, convinced that

> no system of Indian training is right that does not endeavour to develop all the abilities, remove prejudice against labour, and give courage to compete with the rest of the world. The Indian problem exists owing to the fact that the Indian is untrained to take his place in the world. Once teach him to do this, and the solution is had.[33]

In every school, therefore, the children were to receive instruction in a range of subjects, including, for the boys, agriculture, carpentry, shoemaking, blacksmithing, tinsmithing and printing and, for the girls, sewing, shirt making, knitting, cooking, laundry, dairying, ironing and general household duties. As the curriculum was delivered in a half-day system until after the Second World War, with students spending half the day in the classroom and the other half in practical activities, trades training took place both in shops and in learn-by-doing chores. These chores had the additional benefit for the school of providing labour – on the farm and in the residences, bakehouse, laundry and dairy that made operation of the institution possible.[34]

Although these academic and practical courses might clothe the children in the skills and experience they needed to survive and prosper, the department and the churches realized that the children would have to undergo much more profound socialization. Skills would be useless unless accompanied by the values of the society the children were destined to join. The seeds of those values were, of course, embedded in each and every academic subject, in the literature they read, the poetry they recited, and the songs they were taught to sing. As well, however, in its 1896 program of study, the department directed that an ethics course be taught in each grade. In the first year, the students were to be taught the "practice of cleanliness, obedience, respect, order, neatness", followed in subsequent years by "Right and wrong", "Independence. Self-respect", "Industry. Honesty. Thrift", and "Patriotism....Self-maintenance. Charity." In the final year, they were confronted by the "Evils of Indian Isolation", "Labour the Law of Life" and "Home and public duties".[35]

Cardinal among these virtues was moral training for, as a memorandum from the Catholic principals explained, "all true civilization must be based on moral law." Christianity had to supplant the children's Aboriginal spirituality, which was nothing more than "pagan superstition" that "could not suffice" to make them "practise the virtues of our civilization and avoid its attendant vices." In the schools, as well as in the communities, there could be no compromise, no countenancing Aboriginal beliefs and rituals, which, "being the result of a free and easy mode of life, cannot conform to the intense struggle for life which our social conditions require."[36]

The children were not only to imbibe those values, and a new faith, they were to live them. The school was to be a home – a Canadian one. On crossing its threshold, the children were entering a non-Aboriginal world where, with their hair shorn and dressed in European clothes, they would leave behind the 'savage' seasonal round of hunting and gathering for a life ordered by the hourly precision of clocks and bells and an annual calendar of rituals, the festivals of church and state – Christmas, Victoria Day, Dominion Day and St. Jean Baptiste Day – that were the rapid, steady pulse of the industrial world. According to Dewdney, students had to be taught that "there should be an object for the employment of every moment", and thus the "routine...the recurrence of the hours for meals, classwork, outside duties...are all of great importance in the training and education, with a view to future usefulness".[37]

In school, in chapel, at work and even at play the children were to learn the Canadian way. Recreation was re-creation. Games and activities would not be the "boisterous and unorganized games" of "savage" youth. Rather they were to have brass bands, football, cricket, baseball and above all hockey "with the well regulated and...strict rules that govern our modern games", prompting "obedience to discipline" and thus contributing to the process of moving the children along the path to civilization.[38]

None of the foregoing would be achieved, however, unless the children were first released from the shackles that tied them to their parents, communities and cultures. The civilizers in the churches and the department understood this and, moreover, that it would not be accomplished simply by bringing the children into the school. Rather it required a concerted attack on the ontology, on the basic cultural patterning of the children and on their world view. They had to be taught to see and understand the world as a European place within which only European values and beliefs had meaning; thus the wisdom of their cultures would seem to them only savage superstition. A wedge had to be driven not only physically between parent and child but also culturally and spiritually. Such children would then be separated forever from their communities, for even if they went home they would, in the words of George Manuel, bring "the generation gap with them".[39] Only in such a profound fashion could the separation from savagery and the re-orientation as civilized be assured.

That the department and churches understood the central challenge they faced in civilizing the children as that of overturning Aboriginal ontology is seen in their identification of language as the most critical issue in the curriculum. It was through language that children received their cultural heritage from parents and community. It was the vital connection that civilizers knew had to be cut if progress was to be made. E.F. Wilson informed the department that at Shingwauk school, "We make a great point of insisting on the boys talking English, as, for their advancement in civilization, this is, of all things, the most necessary."[40] Aboriginal languages could not carry the burden of civilization; they could not "impart ideas which, being entirely outside the experience and environment of the pupils and their parents, have no equivalent expression in their native language."[41] Those ideas were the core concepts of European culture – its ontology, theology and values. Without the English language, the department announced in its annual report of 1895, the Aboriginal person is "permanently disabled" and beyond the pale of assimilation for, "So long as he keeps his native tongue, so long will he remain a community apart."[42]

The only effective road to English or French, however, and thus a necessary pre-condition for moving forward with the multi-faceted civilizing strategy, was to stamp out Aboriginal languages in the schools and in the children. The importance of this to the department and the churches cannot be overstated. In fact, the entire residential school project was balanced on the proposition that the gate to assimilation was unlocked only by the progressive destruction of Aboriginal languages. With that growing silence would come the dying whisper of Aboriginal cultures. To that end, the department ordered that "the use of English in preference to the Indian dialect must be insisted upon."[43]

It was left to school principals to implement that directive, to teach the languages of 'civilization' – French in Quebec and English in all other parts of Canada, including Francophone areas, and to prevent the language of 'savagery' from being spoken in the school. Some instituted imaginative systems of positive reinforcement through rewards, prizes or privileges for the exclusive use of English. More often than not, however, the common method was punishment. Children throughout the history of the system were beaten for speaking their language.[44]

The third and final part of the vision was devoted to the graduates, their future life and their contribution to the civilization of their communities. It was this aspect of the vision that underwent the greatest change. While the ideology of the curriculum and its goal of extensive cultural replacement remained constant, the perceived utility of the schools to the overall strategy of assimilation and their relationship to Aboriginal communities underwent substantial revision. There were, in fact, two residential school policies. The first, in the long period before the Second World War, placed the school at the heart of the strategy to disestablish communities through assimilation. In the subsequent period, the residential school system served a secondary role in support of the integration of children into the provincial education system and the modernization of communities.

Initially, the schools were seen as a bridge from the Aboriginal world into non-Aboriginal communities. That passage was marked out in clear stages: separation, socialization and, finally, assimilation through enfranchisement. By this last step, the male graduate could avail himself of the enfranchisement provisions of the Indian Act, leaving behind his Indian status and taking on the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

Each stage in the passage had its difficulties, and the department was fully aware that its task was not completed with the training that led to graduation. Indeed, it declared in its annual report of 1887, "it is after its completion that the greatest care...needs to be exercised, in order to prevent retrogression." Retrogression – cultural backsliding – was the great fear. Once the connection between child and community had been broken it should not be re-established; the child should never again fall under the influence of Indian "prejudices and traditions" or the "degradations of savage life."[45] To prevent this unhappy occurrence, the department reported in 1887, it would be best "to prevent those whose education at an industrial institution...has been completed from returning to the reserves". They were instead to be placed in the non-Aboriginal world and secured there by employment in the trade they had learned at the school, "so as to cause them to reside in towns, or, in the case of farmers, in settlements of white people, and thus become amalgamated with the general community."[46] By implication, the future was not only one of amalgamating growing numbers of employable graduates but also the progressive decay and final disappearance of reserve communities.

Reality intervened in this strategy, however, and, indeed, the department and the churches did not exercise the "greatest care" of graduates. There was no placement program, and even if there had been, situations were not available in towns or "settlements of white people". "Race prejudice", an Indian agent informed the department, "is against them and I am afraid that it will take time, under the circumstances, before they can compete with their white brothers in the trades."[47] By 1896, the department had to face the fact that "for the majority [of graduates], for the present at least, there appears to be no alternative" but to return to the reserves.[48] That present became the future; there were always but few openings for graduates. With the exception of temporary labour shortages during the war, it was obvious that "no appreciable number of graduates of the Schools will be in a position to earn a livelihood by working as a craftsman among whites."[49]

The second fact that had to be faced was that in returning to their communities, as Reed predicted, "there will be a much stronger tendency for the few to merge into the many than to elevate them."[50] A great proportion of the graduates would go "back to the ways of the old teepee life",[51] to the "nomadic habits of his ancestors."[52] They could not, one principal reported "stand firm" or "overcome this tendency to drift with the current that carries so many of their own people."[53]

The department and the churches recognized the problem – one that cut to the very heart of their strategy, blunting the usefulness of the schools and in fact so calling into question the industrial school model that, in 1922, it was abandoned in favour of the simpler boarding school, thereafter called a residential school. They recognized it but, as would be the case so often in the history of the system when it faced difficulties, they did very little apart from discuss it and formulate proposals.[54]

In 1898, the deputy superintendent general, James Smart, recognizing the impossibility of countering the drift back to reserves, decided to make a virtue out of necessity. He redesigned the system, supplementing its original emphasis on the enfranchisement of individual graduates with the additional goal of developing the communities to which the graduate returned. It would now be the object "to have each pupil impart what he has gained to his less fortunate fellows, and in fact become a centre of improving influence for the elevation of his race".[55] The graduates could be, the principal of the Regina industrial school predicted, a "great moral force in the uplift of the life of the reserve", providing "an object lesson" in farming, gardening, housekeeping, the care of the sick and "maintaining sanitary conditions about their homes."[56]

By 1901, the department had initiated an experiment, the File Hills colony on the Peepeekeesis reserve, designed to release the graduates' uplifting developmental potential. The colony, under the close supervision of the agent W.M. Graham, was a model settlement of 15 former pupils, each allocated an 80-acre lot, horses, farming equipment, lumber and hardware for houses. Departmental expenses were to be recouped from the young farmers when they achieved an adequate income and the funds transferred to "help others make a like start."[57]

Reports on the colony were promising in 1902 but in ensuing years they were much less so,[58] with the graduates described as being "all the way from 'lazy and indifferent' to 'making favourable or satisfactory progress'".[59] Reflecting these assessments, or perhaps because the experiment was, as the historian Olive Dickason has suggested, "too costly for the budget-minded department",[60] Duncan Campbell Scott chose not to extend it. Instead, he merely called upon principals and agents to co-ordinate the return of graduates to reserves and, so that they should not be thrown "entirely upon [their] own resources", he announced a modest start-up program – offering graduates "a gift of oxen and implements...and the granting of a loan which must be repaid within a certain time, and for which an agreement is signed by the pupil."[61]

These loans substituted for what could have been a more ambitious attempt to resolve the problem of the graduates.[62] As the United Church's Association of Indian Workers in Saskatchewan pointed out in 1930, there continued to be "a missing link that should be forged into the present system along the line of 'Follow up work'."[63] Without such a link, without any effective "control over the graduates",[64] they were destined to return to the reserves, where rather than being that "great moral force",[65] they would fall under "the depressing influence of those whose habits still largely pertain to savage life".[66] For those ex-pupils and for the communities, assimilation would remain an ever-distant departmental goal.

1.2 Changing Policies

> ...the interests of the children are best served by leaving them with their parents.[67]

The fact that the department stumbled in planning this final step to assimilation was augmented by an even more disturbing reality. As a general rule, at no time in the history of the system did the schools produce the well-educated graduates that were the prerequisite for both the original scheme of enfranchisement and Smart's amended community-based strategy. Indeed, the use of the word graduate was rather misleading, for very few children completed the full course of study, though it is clear that many children did receive some of the basics of a rudimentary education and a few children reached advanced levels. Even for those that did complete the program, most schools did not provide the training that was such an essential part of the residential vision. According to a review of the educational performance of the system up to 1950, conducted in 1968 by R.F. Davey, the director of educational services, the practical training that had been in place "contained very little of instructional value but consisted mainly of the performance of repetitive, routine chores of little or no educational value."[68]

Davey's judgement of the quality of the academic program was equally harsh. The system had failed to keep pace with advances in the general field of education and, because the schools were often in isolated locations and generally offered low salaries, the system had been unable to attract qualified staff. A departmental study quoted by Davey found that, as late as 1950, "over 40 per cent of the teaching staff had no professional training. Indeed, some had not even graduated from high school." Moreover, teachers worked under the most difficult conditions. Language training was a persistent problem, and the half-day system reduced class time to the extent that it was, Davey concluded, virtually impossible for students to make significant progress. He noted in his report that in 1945, when there were 9,149 residential school students, the annual report of the department showed only "slightly over 100 students enroled in grades above grade VIII and...there was no record of any students beyond the grade IX level."

In the 1950s and '60s the department made improvements in the educational component of the residential system. Additional departmental educational supervisory staff were employed, in 1951 the half-day system was abandoned, the department assumed direct responsibility for the hiring and remuneration of teachers in 1954,[69] and, in an attempt to attract more competent staff, teachers were "placed upon salary scales which bore some relationship to the salaries paid across the country."[70]

In attracting more competent staff, the department was able to achieve considerable success quickly. By 1957, the number of unqualified teachers in residential schools had been reduced by 50 per cent, and in 1962 the department reported that 91.1 per cent of the teachers it employed were fully qualified.[71] It was not easy to keep the percentage up, however, and two decades later the department admitted that it still had "difficulty in recruiting and retaining education staff."[72] Nevertheless, the department could track advances in educational attainment. By 1959, the number of children in grades 9 to 13 in residential and day schools had increased from none in 1945 to 2,144, and in the next decade, it rose even more rapidly to 6,834, which was just over 10 per cent of the total school (day and residential) population.[73]

All these efforts were overshadowed by what had been and continued to be a most fundamental impediment. Both the curriculum and the pedagogy, which were not in any way appropriate to the culture of the students, made it difficult for the children to learn. This fact could not have escaped the department's and the churches' attention, for on a number of occasions provincial school inspectors, employed by the department to assess the educational condition of the schools, had made the point that the "curricula in use in various provinces are not necessarily the courses of study adapted for use in Indian schools." "It should not be forgotten", Inspector Warkentin informed the department in 1951, "that there is very often a very wide difference in the life experiences of Indian children and white children, a difference which should be reflected in courses of study."[74] Another inspector, while reinforcing this point, added a call for a change in pedagogy to one that would be more familiar to the children. In considering the subject of social studies, for example, he advised that "this work be taught by a due recognition of Indian background. Story telling can be used more effectively to arouse interest."[75]

Although the department admitted in the 1970s that the curriculum had not been geared to the children's "sociological needs", it did little to rectify that situation. A national survey was undertaken "to identify textbooks that the Indian people considered offensive, and steps were taken to remove these books from the schools".[76] Research was commissioned from a number of universities to address "the absence from the school curriculum generally of an Indian cultural component",[77] but none of it was of the scope that would ever have met Warkentin's suggestion that a comprehensive "curriculum specially aimed at the instruction of Indian children should be drawn up".[78] There is no indication in school records that the results of any of this research found its way into the classrooms of residential schools.

Efforts to improve the school program in the post-war period were undercut further by one final factor – the system was gradually abandoned. In 1948, the federal government – on the recommendation of the joint parliamentary committee on Indian affairs, which in hearings held beginning in 1946, had received strong representations from Indian groups for "an end to the policy and practice of segregated education"[79] – initiated an extensive redesign of its Aboriginal education strategy that not only took the emphasis off residential schools but determined that the system should be shut down completely as soon as possible. Departmental efforts and resources were reallocated to a new policy, away from the residential system to creation of a day school system and, most significantly, integration by "transferring Indian children to provincial schools, and federal schools to provincial administrative school units."[80]

The representations of Indian groups cannot be wholly discounted in this development, but in fact the move away from the traditional strategy began even before the war, and the dynamics that motivated it were, as always, a non-Aboriginal assimilative strategy and more mundane considerations – financial ones in this instance. In 1943, R.A. Hoey appeared before a special parliamentary committee on reconstruction and re-establishment. Reacting to statements by one of the committee members – that residential schools "lose a great deal of the value of the education", because they "segregate the children" from their community, and that if children were educated in a day school "[y]ou would educate the parents and the children together" – Hoey admitted that he too had doubts about the efficacy of residential schools. His personal preference was "to see residential schools slowly and gradually closed".[81]

Hoey took back to the department the clear understanding that the "Indians in the judgement of the committee, should be encouraged to attend white schools" and that this would probably be the policy of the future. He was, as the department would be, in total agreement with such a policy directive. As he pointed out to the deputy minister, there was a definite educational benefit in giving the children the "opportunity of associating with white children during their formative years".[82] Such experience would increase the likelihood of their absorbing non-Aboriginal culture or, as Davey characterized it two decades later, would "quicken and give meaning to the accultural process through which [the children] are passing".[83] There also appeared to be a financial advantage for the government, in that integration, Hoey believed, "would in the end be substantially less than the cost of establishing" and operating an exclusively federal system of residential and day schools.[84]

The policy of integration, though an apparently radical redirection of educational policy, was not based on a wholly new vision of education's role in the quest for assimilation. It built upon Smart's idea of community development, but in this version, in a most surprising break with the civilizing logic of the late nineteenth century, an active part was assigned to the parents, whose dangerously savage character and baleful influence appear mysteriously to have disappeared. Indeed, the department took the position that maintaining the parent/child relationship was key – that "there can be no complete substitute for the care and concern of parents and the security which children feel when living at home".[85] Therefore,

> It is considered that the parents, wherever possible, should assume the responsibility for the care of their children, and that the interests of the children are best served by leaving them with their parents when home circumstances and other factors are favourable.[86]

This now-valued parental involvement was even given institutional form in federal day and residential schools. In 1956, the department set up a number of school committees "to stimulate parental and community interest, and to provide experience for the further involvement of Indians in the management of education." The committees, made up of band members, were to act as "advisory boards to departmental staff" and were to be "involved in the operation of the schools", being given authority for the "school lunch program, daily school transportation, repairs and the maintenance of school buildings...and they also present the annual operating budget to the district superintendent of education."[87] While the department expanded this initiative, establishing some 180 such committees by 1971, there was no increase in their authority. Most noticeably, they were given no control over curriculum, perhaps so that whatever traces of the influence of the wigwam still existed might be effectively excluded from the classroom.

There is, indeed, reason to suspect that integration – despite the apparent cultural sensitivity of the textbook survey and commissioned research – did not lessen, and may even have increased, the corrosive impact of education on the culture of the children. Again, as in the original vision, the question of language was the essential template shaping the policy. The department realized that "the most formidable handicap that faces the Indian child entering [the provincial] school"[88] was the requirement to be able to function in English (and in French or English in Quebec). To that end, the greatest emphasis in this period was on the development of a language arts program,[89] and regional language specialists were employed to help the children "overcome any language difficulties",[90] in the belief that "much of the progress in Indian education" was to be realized by these "improved methods of language instruction."[91]

Most significantly, integration meant repositioning the residential school system. No longer the main thrust of the assimilative strategy, it became, as the department described it, "a supplementary service" for children "who for very special reasons, cannot commute to federal day schools or provincial schools from their homes".[92] The new organizing principle of the policy was "that in educational services, everything possible will be done to enable families to stay together, so children will not have to be separated from their parents needlessly."[93]

The whole educational system could not, of course, be remodelled overnight to conform to this new dictum. Rather the change in status occurred school by school, at different times in different parts of the country owing to local circumstances – for example, the development of reserve roads to allow busing of children to day schools, the construction of schools close to communities, and the progress of integration, which could not go forward without negotiating local school board and provincial agreements. The residential school system therefore comprised, at any point in time, a spectrum of different types of residential schools – from those that remained classic residential schools because of community isolation, to those that combined "residential and day school with a preponderance of day students", to those that became hostels or student residences for children brought in from distant communities to provincial schools during the day. There were even some that

> combined hostel, residential and day school, providing boarding facilities only for those pupils attending a nearby provincial school, boarding facilities and classroom instruction for others and classroom instruction only for day pupils.[94]

Finally, a boarding home program, involving the placement of high school students "in carefully selected private homes", was also introduced and substituted for residential assignment of children.[95]

The overall intention, of course, was for all residential schools to be closed as soon as implementation of the integration policy reduced enrolments. In 1948, 60 per cent of the Indian school population was enroled in federal schools.[96] In 1969, 60 per cent were in provincial schools,[97] and the number of residential schools and hostels was reduced from the 72 schools operating in 1948, with 9,368 students, to 52 schools with 7,704. That the number of schools and students did not fall proportionately was attributable not only to local circumstances but to two further difficulties – opposition to closures and the emergence of a new role for the schools as social welfare institutions.

The development of a welfare function was not a completely unforeseen implication of the new integration policy. Hoey had warned the reconstruction and re-establishment committee in 1943 that there would continue to be a need for residential places for "orphans and children from disrupted homes".[98] Because of "such things as alcoholism in the home, lack of supervision, serious immaturity",[99] some parents would not be able, as the new policy directed, to "assume the responsibility for the care of their children".[100] To reflect that reality and at the same time control and reduce residential school enrolments, an admissions policy "based upon the circumstances of the student's family"[101] was adopted. In areas where federal day school attendance or integration was possible, priority was given to children deemed to be "Category 3" – those from families where "a serious problem leading to neglect of children exists". Neglect – measured, of course, against non-Aboriginal norms – was "interpreted as defined in the provincial statute of the province in which the family resides".[102] In line with the general post-war trend of involving provinces in Indian affairs, provincial child welfare agencies co-operated in determining cases of neglect and in placing children in care. Residential schools were an available and apparently popular option within the wider child care system.

As the integration program expanded, many residential schools, particularly in southern Canada, where the rate of progress was most extensive, became, to a degree alarming to the department, repositories for 'neglected' children.[103] A confidential 1966 departmental report estimated that 75 per cent of children in the schools were "from homes which, by reasons of overcrowding and parental neglect or indifference, are considered unfit for school children."[104] This trend caused a serious bottleneck in the process of reducing enrolments. It might have been remedied by providing support to families in communities to "alleviate the situations where children year in and year out are being removed from their homes and the home situation [remains] practically the same."[105] The more usual methods, however, appear to have been either the referral of children requiring long-term care "to a child welfare agency for foster home service" or adoption or the placement of "incorrigible" children with "an officer of a correctional or welfare agency."[106]

As the department characterized the situation, this welfare bottleneck put it in

> the anomalous position of having to administer a group of schools which have a degree of independence of operation permitting them to pursue policies which are diametrically opposed to those of the Federal Government, particularly with respect to segregation and welfare. The tension created by this internal conflict is damaging to the Indian education program and confusing to the Canadian public.[107]

Much of this conflict sprang from opposition to integration that the department had, in fact, anticipated from its old partner in education, the churches, and from "some Indian associations who dislike working with provincial governments, and from individuals, both Indian and non-Indian, who, for personal reasons, wish to keep the federal schools open."[108]

Church opposition came almost exclusively from the Catholic church,[109] which fought particularly hard in western Canada where, as the department noted, perhaps cynically, provinces "do not provide for separate schools".[110] According to the church, its position was purely altruistic. In Residential Education for Indian Acculturation, a study produced in 1959 by the Oblate Indian and Eskimo Welfare Commission, the church argued that separate on-reserve education in day schools or separate residential school education provided greater educational benefits and had greater "efficiency towards acculturation". Residential schools, in addition, provided

> healthier living conditions, more appropriate supervision, better grouping by grade and more vocational training possibilities than the average day school. It is also usually in a better position to offer a wider range of social and recreational activities including those with non-Indians.[111]

The church conducted an aggressive political campaign in the late 1950s and into the 1960s through the reserve-based Catholic Indian League to save the schools it managed and particularly to extend high school services through residential schools.[112] Each closure was a battle by "pulpit, press and politicians"[113] but they were made, school by school, normally by a complicated process of closing residences with low enrolments and transferring the remaining children to others, all the while carefully retaining the single denominational affiliation of each school.[114]

In 1969, the federal government obviated the need for that careful process when it formally ended the partnership with the churches, effectively secularizing Aboriginal education.[115] The department then had almost unrestrained control of the residential school system. The rate of closures in the next decade bore witness to that; by 1979, the number of schools had fallen from 52 with 7,704 students to 12 with 1,899.

The withdrawal of the churches did not clear the way forward completely, however. Bands and political associations insisted on consultation when closures were proposed and pushed for "increased responsibility in the management of student residences".[116] In that same vein, the National Indian Brotherhood proposed in 1971 that "residence services be contracted to Indian groups having the approval of the bands served by the respective residences."[117] Communities connected with the Blue Quills school not only prevented its closure but forced the government to turn it over to the people of the Saddle Lake-Athabaska district.[118] The need for such co-operation became paramount after the government accepted, in 1972, the principle of Indian control of Indian education. In line with that, the department adopted the position that "major changes in the operation and administration of individual residences will be considered only in consultation with Indian parents or their representatives."[119] In the next few years six more schools in Saskatchewan followed the Blue Quills lead. By 1986, apart from a continued funding responsibility for such schools, the department virtually came to the end of the residential school road.[120]

The introduction of integration, the context for the final closure or transfer of the schools, was not the only significant development in the post-war period. As the nation moved north, further penetrating Indian, Métis and Inuit homelands, a whole new tier of schools was created in the Northwest Territories.

Northern Aboriginal peoples had not been untouched by the residential school system in the pre-war period. Schools in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec had taken in children from far northern communities. Yukon Indians were served by the Anglican residential school begun at Carcross in 1902 and by the Catholic Lower Post School in British Columbia.[121] In the Northwest Territories, residential schools operated at Fort Providence, Aklavik and Fort Resolution. Inuit students had been concentrated at the Roman Catholic and Anglican residential schools at Aklavik and Fort George on the eastern coast of James Bay in Quebec. There were, as well, federal and missionary day schools.[122]

In March 1955, the government, through the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, incorporated these largely church-initiated developments into an official educational strategy.[123] This administrative arrangement had been chosen to allow "a single system of schools for children of all races", facilitating "greater economy of effort" and removing "any element of segregation".[124] There any substantial differences with the southern system ended. The presumptive scenario and educational philosophy, the vision and the attitudes toward Aboriginal people that underlay this system, bore considerable resemblance to what they had been in the south. Growing scarcity in the resources that supported the traditional hunting and gathering culture, caused in part by incursions into the region by resource development, combined with a dramatic fall in the price of fur and the rapid growth of population – tied, the government suggested, to improved medical services[125] – provided both the need and the opportunity for a new life. It was the government's announced belief that as "[c]ivilization is now advancing into the Arctic areas at such a rapid pace...[it] is therefore essential that [Aboriginal people] be assisted in every possible way to face the future in a realistic manner – in a way which will result in their becoming true Canadian citizens...".[126]

That assistance was to come primarily by way of "an extensive program of construction of schools and hostels to provide better education."[127] By 1969-1970, as plans were finalized to transfer education to the government of the Northwest Territories,[128] the Northern Affairs department had completed a network of schools that included eight "large pupil residences", with room for an average of 150 children each, and a series of some eleven "small hostels" for up to 25 children in Arctic locations. The annual enrolment averaged some 1,200 children.[129]

Despite the fact that this development occurred in the 1950s and '60s, the 'frontier' nature of the north meant that the system stressed the value of residential schools and hostels. They were characterized, in this latest assimilative campaign, in terms that harked back to Davin's era, as "the most effective way of giving children from primitive environments, experience in education along the lines of civilization leading to vocational training to fit them for occupations in the white man's economy."[130] As in the south, the hostels brought children of "nomadic parents" into contact with day schools to facilitate the "complete integration of the education of the Indians and Eskimos in the north with white children living in the same area." Again, the system would employ the acculturative medium of "provincial curricula", with teachers being "encouraged to adapt these to the special needs of the Eskimo child."

Residential schools and hostels were to make not only an educational contribution but also, Northern Affairs predicted, a wider socializing, civilizing function that would serve educational advancement. With respect to Inuit, for example, they would have the advantage of removing children from homes that lacked "all the more desirable habits of sanitation, cleanliness and health since the tents and snow houses in which they live are so small and their way of life is so primitive." In the schools, it would be possible to carry out "adequate health education programmes" which, with improvements on the traditional diet, would "make them better able to carry on with their schooling", which would in turn ensure their "orderly integration into the white economy."[131]

In the north, as in the south in the days before integration, the government with its church partners presumed to stand in the place of the children's parents, taking children into residential schools so that they could "face the future in a realistic manner" – that being as "true Canadian citizens". Unfortunately, the record of this national presumption, whether traced in the north or the south cannot be drawn as a "circle of civilized conditions."

2. Systemic Neglect: Administrative and Financial Realities

In any evaluation of the residential school record throughout its long history, a persistent reality appears amidst shifting vision and policies. Not only did the system fail to transport Aboriginal children through the classroom to the desired assimilative destination – or even, as Davey's 1968 record witnessed, to provide adequate levels of education – it failed to cherish them. In the building, funding and management of those purported "circles of civilized conditions", it failed to make of those schools homes where children would always be well-clothed and fed, safely housed and kindly treated. Even in the post-war period, administrative and financial reforms adopted in the midst of the general reorganization of Aboriginal education could not retrieve the situation and did not reverse the chronic neglect of the system, which forced children to live in conditions and endure levels of care that fell short of acceptable standards.

The persistently woeful condition of the school system and the too often substandard care of the children were rooted in a number of factors: in the government's and churches' unrelieved underfunding of the system, in the method of financing individual schools, in the failure of the department to exercise adequate oversight and control of the schools, and in the failure of the department and the churches to ensure proper treatment of the children by staff. Those conditions constituted the context for the neglect, abuse and death of an incalculable number of children and for immeasurable damage to Aboriginal communities.

This is not the story of an aging nineteenth century structure falling into decay but of flaws, inherent in the creation and subsequent management of the system, that were never remedied. From Confederation, with two schools in operation, the system grew at the rate of some two schools a year, so that by 1904 there were 64 schools. Such growth was not the product of forethought, of a developmental strategy controlled by the government or by the department of Indian affairs. Rather it was the product of federal reactions to the force of missionary efforts across the country and the considerable force of the churches' political influence in Ottawa by which they secured funds to operate the schools.[132] No better summary of the process of building the system can be given than that contained in a departmental briefing to the minister, Charles Stewart, in 1927: "It thus happens that Churches have been pioneers in the remote parts of the country, and with missionary funds have put up buildings and induced the department to provide funds for maintenance."[133]

Though its senior officials were themselves dedicated to the concept of residential education, the department was in a sense driven before a whirlwind of missionary activity. No matter which way it turned – in the west, the north and into British Columbia – as it moved to implement Davin's industrial school design, the department found schools already constructed and holding classes for children. By 1907 – with 77 schools on the books, the great majority of them established by the churches, and with no sign of the flood of new schools or church petitions for support waning – the senior clerk in the education section, Martin Benson, proclaimed, with evident exasperation, "The clergy seem to be going wild on the subject of Indian education and it is time some limit should be fixed as to their demands."[134]

Indeed, the department had already tried, unsuccessfully, to bring the system, especially its rapidly rising costs, under control. By order in council in 1892, the department introduced what Vankoughnet termed a "correct principle" – a per capita grant arrangement that remained in force until 1957.[135] This principle was attractive because, in theory at least, it would enable the department to "know exactly where we stand", limiting the federal contribution to the schools to a fixed annual figure tied to enrolments.[136]

This attempt by the department to "relieve the pressure of present expenditure" and to institute "economical management" on the part of the churches, to quote the order in council, was a total failure. In limiting the liability of the department, the per capita system automatically threw an increased financial burden onto the shoulders of the churches. In the case of schools where the per capita grant did not meet a large enough part of the operating costs, which were impossible to standardize owing to the differing circumstances of schools – location, access to supplies, the availability of students – or where school management continued to be faulty, churches soon claimed that their funds were oversubscribed. They returned to Ottawa, cap in hand, for additional funding and yearly made demands for increases in per capita rates. By 1904, the collective deficit was $50,000 and rising, and the auditor general demanded yet tighter control – "A rigid inspection of financial affairs should be made on behalf of the government at least once a year."[137]

The auditor general was not alone in pushing for reform. In 1906 the Protestant churches submitted their Winnipeg Resolutions, drawn up at a conference on education. These reiterated demands they had been making each year for increased per capitas, upgrading of schools at government expense, and increased allocations for teachers' salaries.[138] The resolutions and the deputy superintendent general's admission that the financial ills of the system lay in underfunding[139] rather than, as the department charged constantly, in the inefficient and extravagant hands of church appointed principals, brought on the second attempt to bring order to the system. This took the form of contracts between the government and the churches, signed in 1911, in which, the minister promised,

> the whole conduct and management of these schools would be covered...the responsibilities of each toward the other would be definitely fixed and the financial straits in which the churches found themselves...would in a measure be relieved by the Government.[140]

The minister was as good as his word – in part. New, higher per capita rates, recognizing regional cost differences, were adopted,[141] and the contracts dealt with the obligations of the churches and the government, establishing the department as senior partner in the joint management of the schools. It had primary responsibility for setting standards of care and education, including the appointment and dismissal of teachers, and it reserved the right to cancel the contract pertaining to any school not being operated according to the regulations it formulated. To that end, the churches had to hold the schools ready for inspection by the department.[142]

The contracts were meant to mark a new beginning for the system, laying the basis for "improved relations" between the department and the churches that were in turn to result "in benefit to the physical condition and intellectual advancement of the Indian children."[143] Such hopeful predictions were not, however, the substance of effective reform. The system soon fell back into funding and management difficulties. The contracts were to be reviewed and renewed at the end of five years, but they never were and without any legal agreement to bind the parties, they drifted back into the previous "unbusinesslike lack of arrangement"[144] and into discord over operation of the system.

On the financial front, government intentions were overborne by a long string of excuses for continued underfunding. The First World War and then the Depression prevented significant increases or clawed back, in whole or part, those the department was able to allocate.[145] While the Second World War pulled the country out of the Depression, it also meant cuts "to almost every appropriation"[146] and made the department realize that "it would be exceedingly difficult to secure the funds necessary...at any time during the years that lie ahead of us."[147]

As a result, there were never enough funds in the pre-Second World War era to satisfy the appetite of the churches or to prevent them from again encountering substantial deficits.[148] While the department publicly contested the churches' assertion of how desperate the financial situation was, privately it had its own figures that demonstrated dramatically that the per capita, pegged at $180 in 1938, was "exceptionably low" and inadequate for the needs of the children, particularly in relation to the funding of other residential care facilities. Hoey informed the deputy superintendent general, H. McGill, that the province of Manitoba provided grants of $642 and $550 per capita respectively to the School for the Deaf and the School for Boys. Private institutions in the province were also funded more generously. The Knowles School for Boys received $362 for each boy from the Community Chest, and the Catholic church provided St. Norbert's Orphanage with $294 per capita. The residential schools fared no better in comparison with funding for similar institutions in the United States, where the Child Welfare League of America estimated that the average per capita grant of large child care institutions was $541, with smaller ones running only as low as $313.[149]

The cumulative weight of underfunding of the system throughout this period, which pressed down on the balance books of the churches and the department and drove individual schools into debt, was nothing compared to its consequences for the schools and their students. Badly built, poorly maintained and overcrowded, the schools' deplorable conditions were a dreadful weight that pressed down on the thousands of children who attended them. For many of those children it proved to be a mortal weight. Scott, reviewing the history of the system for the new minister, Arthur Meighen, in 1918, noted that the buildings were "undoubtedly chargeable with a very high death rate among the pupils."[150]

When the churches and the department signed the 1911 contracts, it was clear to all the partners that there was a crisis in the conditions and sanitation of the schools and, therefore, in the health of the children. They could not have failed to know it for they had at hand two reports, one by the department's chief medical officer, Dr. P.H. Bryce, outlining in a most sensational manner the tragic impact of tuberculosis on the children, and another by a departmental accountant, F.H. Paget, who had been detailed to survey the condition of the schools in the west.

Throughout the initial stages of the unrestrained building of the system, the department had been, Duncan Campbell Scott admitted, "intensely apprehensive" about the quality and safety of the schools, which the churches routinely "erected on very primitive plans".[151] According to an assessment of the system by Martin Benson in 1897, the department's own record was not a great deal better. Many of the buildings it was responsible for constructing, in association with the department of public works, had "been put up without due regard for the purpose for which they would be required, hurriedly constructed of poor materials, badly laid out without due provision for lighting, heating or ventilating."[152] The department had, in fact, insisted in the north-west on the "simplest and cheapest construction."[153]

Paget's 1908 report revealed the legacy of such a policy. The majority of the 21 schools he inspected were, like St. Paul's boarding school near Cardston, Alberta, "quite unfit for the purpose it is being used", with faulty heating, drainage and ventilation. The schools were "not modern in any respect." Moreover, his comments drew out what had become a tragic commonplace in the department – the connection between the condition of the buildings and disease, particularly the scourge of tuberculosis.[154] From early in the history of the system, alarming health reports had come into the department from local officials and doctors tracing out a pattern of interwoven factors contributing to "the present very high death rate from this disease": overcrowding, lack of care and cleanliness and poor sanitation.[155]

Overcrowding, the most critical dynamic in the spread of tuberculosis, was systemic,[156] a predictable outcome of underfunding and of the per capita grant arrangement that put a premium on each student taken from a community. Senior church officials lobbied the government constantly not only for higher rates but for implementation of a compulsory education regime that would ensure that the schools earned the maximum grant possible.[157] For their part, the principals, unable to make ends meet, as rates were rarely increased to the level of real costs, pushed to have their authorized enrolments raised. The pressure to keep schools full meant there was a tendency to take as many children as possible, often going past wise limits, with disastrous consequences.[158] This led to bizarre recruitment techniques, including, local officials reported, "bribing and kidnapping".[159] As well, officials were not very careful about the health of the children they brought into the schools. The Anglican Bishop of Caledonia in British Columbia admitted candidly, "The per capita grant system encourages the taking in of those physically and intellectually unfit simply to keep up numbers".[160]

The impact of Bryce's report, submitted in 1907, which in part only repeated what was already in departmental files, stemmed from his statistical profile of the extent of tuberculosis among children in western schools. It became the stuff of headlines and critical editorial comment. Saturday Night concluded that "even war seldom shows as large a percentage of fatalities as does the education system we have imposed upon our Indian wards."[161] The percentage was indeed shocking. Bryce's death toll for the 1,537 children in his survey of 15 schools was 24 per cent, and this figure might have risen to 42 per cent if the children had been tracked for three years after they returned to their reserves.[162] The rate varied from school to school going as high as 47 per cent at Old Sun's on the Blackfoot reserve. Kuper Island school in British Columbia, which was not included in Bryce's sample, had a rate of 40 per cent over its 25-year history.[163] While a few officials and churchmen rejected Bryce's findings and attacked him as a "medical faddist",[164] most had to agree with him,[165] and no less an authority than Scott asserted that, system-wide, "fifty per cent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein."[166]

Not only was this, in the words of Saturday Night, "a situation disgraceful to the country",[167] but in the opinion of S.H. Blake, QC, who assisted in negotiations for the 1911 contracts, because the department had done nothing over the decades "to obviate the preventable causes of death, [it] brings itself within unpleasant nearness to the charge of manslaughter."[168] The churches too bore responsibility for what Bryce characterized, in a pamphlet published in 1922, as a "national crime",[169] but the department had a special responsibility. In the order in council of 1892 and in the 1911 contracts, it had taken to itself the authority to set standards and had instituted a regulation requiring that prospective students receive a health certificate signed by a doctor. This check, which would supposedly prevent tubercular children being taken into the schools, was – like so many other regulations relating to care of the children, such as those regarding clothes, food and discipline – implemented carelessly by the department and ignored by many school and departmental officials. Such laxity even continued, Scott admitted, in the decades after Bryce's report.[170]

Indeed, in those decades, almost nothing was done about tuberculosis in the schools, so that Bryce's charge that "this trail of disease and death has gone on almost unchecked by any serious efforts on the part of the Department of Indian Affairs",[171] was sorrowfully correct. The department did not even launch a full investigation of the system. Again the explanation for this persistent carelessness was, in part, the government's refusal to fund the schools adequately to carry out a program of renovations to improve health conditions, which senior officials themselves proposed, or to undertake special measures, recommended by health authorities, to intervene in the case of sick children.[172] In a number of instances it did implement, because it was relatively cheap, a radical course of action – mass surgery, performed on school tables, to remove teeth, tonsils and adenoids, believed to be the frequent seats of infection.[173] Not surprisingly, conditions did not improve; schools in 1940 were still not being maintained "in a reasonable state",[174] and the few reports extant on the health of the children, which are scattered and sketchy (for the department never set up a procedure to monitor health) point to the continuation of alarmingly high rates of infection.[175]

The dramatic tuberculosis story, which chronicles what Bryce suggested was the government's "criminal disregard" for the "welfare of the Indian wards of the nation",[176] cannot be allowed to distract attention from the fact that the care of the children in almost every other area was also tragically substandard. Throughout the history of the system many children were, as the principal of St. George's testified in 1922, "ill-fed and ill-clothed and turned out into the cold to work", trapped and "unhappy with a feeling of slavery existing in their minds" and with no escape but in "thought".[177]

It is difficult to assess how widespread neglect was in the area of food and clothing, for again the department had no reporting procedure, and there is evidence of a fair deal of duplicity on the part of the churches, or individual principals, anxious to make the most favourable impression. A comment in 1936 by A. Hamilton, a local departmental official, on the children at Birtle school, just outside Birtle, Manitoba, symbolizes the situation.

> In fairness I want to add that all the children have good clothes but these are kept for Sundays and when the children go downtown – in other words when out where they can be seen, they are well dressed.[178]

Such deception was often quite deliberate. "To almost everything at Round Lake", one teacher admitted, "there are two sides, the side that goes in the report and that inspectors see, and the side that exists from day to day."[179] This phenomenon was widespread. It was common practice that when an official wanted to add weight to a school report, he introduced it with the remark, "There was no preparation made for my visit as I was quite unexpected."[180] When it was known the official was coming, the children could be and were cowed into answering questions about their care in the way school administrators wanted.[181]

Despite the duplicity, reports in departmental files from school staff, local agents and inspectors establish that the system did not guarantee that all children were always properly fed and clothed. Hunger was a permanent reality: the food was often "too meagre";[182] the fare was not appropriate "neither as to quantity or quality";[183] the children "were not given enough to eat especially meat";[184] the food supply was inadequate "for the needs of the children"; the "vitality of the children is not sufficiently sustained from a lack of nutritious food, or enough of the same for vigorous growing children."[185]

The same files carry images of the children that disrupt Hamilton's picture of Sunday downtown dress at Birtle school: "I have never seen such patched and ragged clothing";[186] their "uniform is so old and so worn out that we do not dare show them to anyone";[187] the children "are not being treated at all good, nothing on their feet, etc.";[188] the children were "dirty and their clothes were disgraceful";[189] and "I never had in my school a dirtier, more ill-clad or more likeable class of little folk". The children had

> the most ridiculous outfits. The little girls go teetering around in pumps with outlandish heels, sizes too large, or silly little sandals that wont stay on their feet – cheap lots that he [the principal] buys for next to nothing, or second hand misfits that come in bales.[190]

Those "second hand misfits that come in bales" signify that in these areas of care, the lack of funding by the government and the churches was yet again a major determinant in the treatment of the children. Whenever per capita rates were reduced or seen to be too low, someone was bound to point out that it would "render almost superhuman the task of feeding, clothing and treating the children in the manner required by the department."[191] It was often "utterly impossible" to do that "from the present per capita grant",[192] and thus principals took the tack of "economizing to the bone in every possible department."[193] In 1937, Hoey conceded that throughout the history of the system there had never been any connection between "our payments and the cost of feeding and clothing pupils from year to year" and that principals had been left on their own to deal with "the actual costs of operation."[194]

While the resultant 'economizing' may have meant no more than charity clothes in some cases, in terms of food, the consequences were more drastic and damaging to the education and health of the children. To keep costs down, administrators strove to produce food and income from the school farm or orchard – an undertaking in which the children, in Scott's description of Qu'Appelle, were "simply used as so much manpower to produce revenue."[195] As his comment suggests, the department was fully aware of the situation and, indeed, of the way it undercut the education program, in some instances, as at Birtle, turning it on its head. Hamilton commented, after visiting the school, that "The farm should be operated for the school – not the school for the farm."[196] Agent W. Graham's 1916 review of school records at Qu'Appelle found that, owing to work, the boys were in class so infrequently that "the main idea and object of the school is being entirely neglected" and that the school had become a "workhouse".[197] This practice continued until 1951 when the half-day system was abandoned. At Morley school in Saskatchewan the inspector reported that, to the detriment of their education, the principal threw "a large burden of the institutional drudgery on to the children."[198]