

The Story of a
National Crime Podcast
Episode 2: "A condition
disgraceful to the country"

Written by

Maia Foster-Sanchez

Content Warning

NARRATOR

A warning before we begin: This series discusses Residential Schools, medical racism, segregated health care, and missing patients.

Support is available to Residential School Survivors and intergenerational Survivors 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through the National Indian Residential School Crisis Line. The Hope 4 Wellness Helpline also offers mental health and crisis support over the phone or on-line. Contact information is available in the show notes.

MUSIC

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

You might see a few graves of kids, but that's a necessary sacrifice for this larger aim of "goodness" that I'm offering you and I'm offering society.

NARRATOR

This is Cindy Blackstock.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

My name is Cindy Blackstock. I'm Gitxsan, and I am honored to be the Executive Director of the First Nations Children and Family Caring Society. I'm also a professor at McGill University. The Caring Society was created by First Nations across Canada who were looking after children - the experts on the ground. We needed to challenge the systemic underfunding of public services for First Nations children. What was a not so hidden secret was that the Canadian government was really in charge of apartheid public services. They were giving First Nations people a lot less and creating a public narrative as if they received more.

Imagine today that the government decided that all of you were

uncivilized and therefore you're not capable of looking after your houses, you're not capable of looking after your neighborhoods. You need to benefit from my way of doing things. I'm actually going to apply a law so that if you resist me, I'm going to put you in jail. The type of law I am going to pass is going to touch on your spirituality. So, any of your ceremonies that are important in your family or customs are going to be unlawful. And if you practice them, I'm going to throw you in jail. I'm going to move you from your house because I want that land for someone who is civilized. I'm going to put you on a bad patch of land and then I'm going to say to you, you got to stay there. I'm going to actually restrict you from moving around. I'm kind and if you need to leave, you can apply to me to leave. But you have to get my permission to leave. That's what reserves are. Then I'm going to say all of the legitimate people in your community who make decisions, people maybe that you have elected, or you appoint? They're actually not the people who are best placed to make decisions for you. I am. So, I'm going to structure your whole governance, the way that you're governing yourselves. Your language that you've spoken up until today? That's a savage language. I am going to make sure that you're learning my language and that your kids are taught not only that your language is bad, but that everything you taught them is uncivilized and savage and is to be rejected. If you resist doing that, I'm going to take your kids away from you and I'm going to put your kids into schools - that is going to teach them the proper ways of doing things. You might see a few graves of kids, but that's a necessary sacrifice for this larger aim of "goodness" that I'm offering you and I'm offering

society.

That, basically, is a way of understanding what the history of Canada is from the perspective of a First Nation, Métis, or Inuit person.

MUSIC

NARRATOR

In this episode, as we delve into the 1907 Bryce Report, we're going to hear more from Cindy Blackstock, as well as Teresa Edwards, Paul Hackett, Erin Millions, Kaila Johnston, and Anne Lindsay.

This is The Story of a National Crime.

MUSIC

NARRATOR

On June 19, 1907, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce submitted the "Report on the Indian Schools of Manitoba and the North West Territories" to Frank Pedley, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. The report contained three sections: the history of the schools, the condition of the schools, and the health of the pupils. The findings were a result of in-person visits across 35 schools and follow up surveys. The findings documented the connections between the Indian Residential School System, disease, and mortality. Bryce expressed that those responsible for the health of the students did not entirely understand the gravity of the situation and hid the prevalence of tuberculosis. He also flagged to the federal government that immediate action was necessary.

Before we continue, a reminder that quotes from historical correspondence use terms that are no longer acceptable, and some descriptions can be graphic. We have

kept that language intact when quoting historical sources.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

He was born in Mount Pleasant, Ontario,

NARRATOR

This is Cindy again.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

and he became a doctor when Canada was nine years old.

NARRATOR

In 1876.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

He had a real interest in public health.

NARRATOR

It was his passion. He believed public health reforms would improve society.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

So, he became the Chief Medical Health Officer of Ontario. He wrote the very first Health Code in Ontario. This wasn't just some backwards doctor. He was president of the American Public Health Association! His code was used as a model all over the United States and Canada. He was a North American expert on public health. He wanted to become Canada's first public health officer. He decided when an opening came up for this Indian department that it was a good stepping stone - and "Maybe there's something I might be able to do on the infectious disease side for the Indians." So, he accepts this post and that launches him into history!

NARRATOR

Bryce was appointed as the Medical

Inspector to the Department of the Interior and of Indian Affairs on January 22, 1904, by order in council, which is a type of legislation. The order in council states his qualifications, relevant experience, and work as the Secretary of the Provincial Board of Health of Ontario. During the first three years in the role, he wrote papers and lectures on immigration and the consequences of urbanization. In 1905, Bryce wrote to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier explaining the government could reduce tuberculosis death rates in First Nations by offering First Nations the same measures to prevent and treat tuberculosis that were available to the rest of Canada. In 1907, Bryce was instructed to conduct a special report by the Minister of the Indian Affairs.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

They sent him out to do a survey of the health of the kids in Residential Schools in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

NARRATOR

Bryce spent three months visiting 35 schools in the Prairies. He saw the poorly designed and constructed school buildings, the deplorable sanitary conditions, and many sick students. In the report, he describes how he learned about students' health histories through surveys.

MALE VOICE

"One of my special instructions was to obtain a statistical statement of the past history and present condition of the health of the children who have been pupils at the different schools. A list of questions was, therefore, left with each principal, requiring that they be answered and sent directly to my address in Ottawa".

NARRATOR

Out of 35 schools, only 15 responded.

MUSIC

In 1883, Prime Minister McDonald authorized the creation of the Residential School System based on recommendations from the 1879 Davin Report. The report proposed industrial schools in Western Canada funded by the government and operated by the churches. Churches had long-established mission schools that targeted Indigenous children for religious and cultural conversion. Turning mission schools into boarding schools would limit Indigenous parents' influence on their children and contribute to a policy of "aggressive assimilation".

TERESA EDWARDS

If you look at it in a wheel of events that happened to attack all that is Indigenous and to kill the Indian in the child, one of the last acts was to take down the heart of the family and that is the removal of children from seven generations of our People.

NARRATOR

This is Teresa Edwards from the Legacy of Hope Foundation.

TERESA EDWARDS

When I hear people talk about assimilation, I always stop them in their tracks and say: this was never assimilation.

NARRATOR

These schools separated children and tried to destroy their connections to their families, communities, cultures, languages, and spiritualities. While we often hear the word "assimilation" in relation to the history of segregated

education in Canada, it is a very gentle way to describe it. Here's Teresa again:

TERESA EDWARDS

[With] assimilation policies you would have integration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. You wouldn't have had Residential Schools erected far from public oversight with purposeful intent that most Canadians wouldn't know about it. You wouldn't have had these propaganda posters developed so that if anyone did question when things were made public, such as they were by Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce and others that followed, they fell on deaf ears because there was a constant propaganda being dispelled by the government to say it's for the betterment of society, creating fear that your children will be at risk and these children are dangerous. They even created posters where they dressed up Indigenous children with muskets and knives. But when we look back, we see from historians and from our Indigenous Elders that the photos were completely doctored. You have girls' hair ties on a young boy or beads that would have been worn by a young girl were put on a boy. They just put a mishmash of things to create these posters to say look at these wild savages that need to give up their entire identity and become Canadians. For me, it could never be the intent to make them assimilate into society. If you were to treat any nation in the way that our nations were treated it could only lead to disaster.

NARRATOR

These schools were intended to be segregated and strip away children's identities. They were far away from children's homes and watchful parents, and children were brought to the schools from many nations

across far distances. The schools contributed to Canada's Indian policies including trying to undermine Indigenous rights, terminate the Treaties, and eventually destroy Indigenous Peoples all together. Indian policies were genocidal.

Parents resisted the early days of the Residential School System by refusing to enroll their children or not bringing them back after the summer break or if they ran away from school. They asked the government to build Day Schools so their children could come home. They requested improved education, food, and clothing. The school administrations saw parents as negative influences in their children's education and disregarded their concerns and criticism.

AD BREAK

The 1907 Bryce report shed light on several disturbing and lethal aspects of the schools.

PAUL HACKETT

One can associate the Residential School System with tuberculosis and tuberculosis with the Residential School System.

NARRATOR

This is Paul Hackett.

PAUL HACKETT

I'm an associate professor in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Saskatchewan. I'm working in the area of the history of tuberculosis. I'm particularly interested in Western Canada, the Residential School System and its contribution to tuberculosis.

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I think from an understanding of the mortality that we're now starting to comprehend as a society in Canada, you can't separate tuberculosis from the Residential School System. In terms of the prevalence of the

disease, it was probably near universal. We learned from Peter Bryce's earlier report that a majority of the kids were dying of tuberculosis within a few years of leaving the school.

We're looking at overcrowding. In some cases, 100 kids packed into a school where there should have been half that. Situations where kids' beds were head to toe packed into a room. Overcrowding tends to increase the likelihood that transmission will occur.

NARRATOR

In the last episode, we talked about how children were not fed enough food and how food was not nutritious.

PAUL HACKETT

Their immune system is weakened in part because they don't have quality food, because they don't have the nutrients they need. And that greatly contributes to the possibility of moving from infection to that transition from infection to active TB, having a poor immune system is going to be a major player in that. So, the kids when they went to residential school are suddenly being exposed to conditions where they're not getting the food they need. Whereas at home, perhaps, particularly in the North, they were eating bush food and food that would have kept them healthy.

NARRATOR

Stress also plays a role in developing diseases.

PAUL HACKETT

The kids were obviously under huge amounts of stress being taken away, the abuse, not being able to speak their language. In many cases, living with kids from all different communities. So, we kind of create a perfect situation where tuberculosis

can be spread around and then develop in the individual and larger community of children.

There's a great quote by Dr. William Osler, a famous Canadian tuberculosis physician. It's really the foundation for understanding what happened with Indigenous people in Canada and tuberculosis. So, the quote is: "Tuberculosis is a social disease with a medical aspect." It is, in other words, caused by social conditions. It has the characteristics we associate with a disease, but it's pretty much associated with inequities, deprivation, and colonialism.

AD BREAK

NARRATOR

According to the Bryce Report, the 15 schools were in operation for an average of 14 years had 1,537 students. 7% of those students were sick or in poor health and 24% had been reported dead. The File Hills school reported 22 students' deaths at the school or within three years of leaving the school. 75% of File Hills students on the discharge list died. Almost every death was caused by consumption or tuberculosis. Consumption is what tuberculosis of the lungs used to be called. Tuberculosis was almost always the cause of death at the other schools as well. Bryce also notes that at the time the students were enrolled in the schools, they had been healthy.

MALE VOICE

"With but two or three exceptions, no serious attempt at ventilation of dormitories or school-rooms had hitherto been made; that the air-space of both is, in the absence of regular and sufficient ventilation, extremely inadequate; that for at least 7 months in the long winter of the west, double

sashes are on the windows in order to save fuel and maintain warmth and that for some 10 continuous hours, children are confined in dormitories, the air of which, if pure to start with, has within 15 minutes become polluted..."

NARRATOR

An indictment underlined by frustration. He goes on to say that with the infected students sleeping in the same dormitories,

MALE VOICE

"We have created a situation so dangerous to health that I was often surprised that the results were not even worse than they have been shown statistically to be.

NARRATOR

He recommended addressing the problems with the buildings, having each school appoint a nurse to be trained to treat tuberculosis, increasing students' physical activity, and improving the food served to students. He thought the department could conduct trials at one or two schools before adopting his recommendations. While Indian agents supported Bryce's findings, church officials were defensive at his suggestion of removing the churches from delivering his recommendations. The government was not interested in adopting his recommendations and new students were enrolled every year.

NARRATOR

Here's Cindy again on the government's reaction to Bryce's findings:

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

He's confident that based on the science and based on what he understands good government to be,

that they are going to take action to implement these reforms. And he gets stonewalled by a guy named Duncan Campbell Scott. Now, Duncan Campbell Scott is known to many of us. If you're going to take a Canadian literature class, he'll be there as a Confederate poet. But his day job was Indian Affairs and he is refusing to do anything because this would get in the way of his solving the "Indian problem" for Canada. So, Bryce is not satisfied. He realizes, "Okay, I'm going to just go above this guy's head. I'm going to write to Prime Minister Laurier." Bryce presents his evidence and says, "You need to save these children's lives. You need to act. Force this Duncan Campbell Scott to do his job." And nothing happens.

NARRATOR

Almost nothing happened to improve health in Residential Schools. The Department of Indian Affairs did not publish the report, provided minimal money for building improvements and created isolation wards for sick students. But journalists did draw attention to leaked details of the report.

A common defense of the Residential School System and the larger web of colonialism in Canada is that the decision makers and perpetrators were "of their time". In the last episode, we heard that many officials had racist and negative views of Indigenous Peoples, but the press and public reactions to the Bryce report show that not everyone thought like that. Many opposed the health conditions in Residential Schools.

On November 15, 1907, The Evening Citizen from Ottawa ran a story on the report and the headline read:

MALE VOICE

SCHOOLS AID WHITE PLAGUE - STARTLING
DEATH ROLLS REVEALED AMONG INDIANS -
ABSOLUTE INATTENTION TO BARE
NECESSITIES OF HEALTH.

NARRATOR

Absolute inattention to bare necessities of health. The British Colonist's headline was "Indian Schools Deal Out Death" and the article states that the Bryce report reveals how conditions in the schools encourage disease and require "immediate remedy".

On November 23, Saturday Night Magazine stated that the report should "startle the country", "compel the attention of Parliament", and that the report revealed a situation "disgraceful to the country". The author wrote:

MALE VOICE

"Indian boys and girls are dying like flies in these situations or shortly after leaving them... Even war seldom shows as large a percentage of fatalities as does the education system we have imposed on our Indian wards."

NARRATOR

Newspapers shared this information across the country and covered the discussions in the House of Commons.

AD BREAK

NARRATOR

After 9 months of government inaction, Bryce sent follow up correspondence to Duncan Campbell Scott and Scott's superiors expressing his displeasure at the lack of action on the report and recommendations. He felt Scott was relying on Canadian indifference, Scott replied,

MALE VOICE

"The Department is doing as well as can be expected for the Indians, and

to anything further would entail a very heavy expenditure, which at present, I am not able to recommend."

NARRATOR

Scott even refused to have tuberculosis in First Nations as a topic for discussion at the National Tuberculosis Association's meeting in 1910.

The 1907 Bryce report documented evidence of widespread neglect that was swept under the rug even though it had generated public outrage.

ANNE LINDSAY

Bryce's work identified, documented and publicized the ongoing issues with tuberculosis in the schools in a way that drew on the authority of science and the scientific method at a time when science had a lot of sway with people in authority.

NARRATOR

This is Anne Lindsay.

ANNE LINDSAY

I'm a settler historian as well, doing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Winnipeg, where I'm working with Dr. Mary Jane McCallum.

He positioned tuberculosis in the schools as a result of problems, such as poor ventilation and other standards of care, rather than as a sort of racial susceptibility.

NARRATOR

Erin Millions works with Anne:

ERIN MILLIONS

I'm a settler historian and the research director for the Manitoba Indigenous Tuberculosis History Project at the University of

Winnipeg.

NARRATOR

Erin is careful to remind us that the 1907 report was not unique in its concern about residential schools, but it stood apart for another reason.

ERIN MILLIONS

There have always been opponents to the Residential School System and particularly to the conditions in the schools from the time the schools were established in Western Canada in the 1880s through to the end of the Residential School System. Now this included of course the parents of students in the schools but also many, many government officials including Indian agents, missionaries, police, and school principals. All of these people were consistently reporting to their own employers that the conditions in the Residential Schools were subpar.

At first his report in 1907 was fully ignored by the government just like all the other recommendations that had been previously made. It was just another report on a pile of ignored reports about conditions in the Residential Schools. It got the attention of the public and that's what really made Bryce's report different. He also gives very clear and specific numbers about infection and death rates in the schools that he surveyed, and those statistics are based on several schools, not just one school. That makes it a lot more difficult to ignore or dispute those numbers than one locally based complaint from one parent, one Indian agent, or one principal.

NARRATOR

The government knew about the health conditions in schools as far back as the 1890s. Here's Kaila Johnston

from the National Centre for Truth
and Reconciliation:

KAILA JOHNSTON

Policies to prevent the spread of tuberculosis were developed on a piecemeal basis and had fragmented implementation. A uniform policy on medical examination of new students was slow to emerge. But the need for such examinations was reported as early as 1884 at the Battleford School, where then principal Thomas Clark recommended students be examined by a medical officer before admission. Principals were often unwilling to follow government policies, either because they opposed those measures because it limited enrollment and thus limited funds, or because they didn't have the money or ability to implement that. Now, In the 1890s, a medical advisor informed Indian Affairs that tuberculosis was contagious, and it would be of great benefit if Residential Schools can isolate sick students, that unhealthy students be screened out before admission, that ventilation be increased, and that health would improve with an improvement of diet. The federal government had been given three options to deal with this crisis: They could close all the schools or turn the schools into sanatoria. Option three was to screen students. The federal government decided option three was what they were going to do, but they were unable to enforce the policy.

NARRATOR

Field staff continued reporting concerns to the department. Dr. George T. Orton in southern Manitoba told the department of the high rates of tuberculosis in the schools in 1891. He pointed to poor ventilation as the cause of transmission. In 1895, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs Hayter Reed asked departmental doctors about the health conditions they encountered. They stated that many healthy students who entered the schools fell ill with tuberculosis or died from it. Reed sought more information and replies stated that students were, in fact, more affected by tuberculosis than children on reserves due to conditions in the schools,

homesickness, and the false idea that it was a hereditary disease. In 1897, a departmental report submitted by Martin Benson revealed "most school buildings were constructed without regard for basic sanitary standards," contributing to the spread of illness.

Here's Paul again.

PAUL HACKETT

The responsibility was there once the Treaty was signed that the federal government was to take care of people and they did a miserable job. This is the report that succinctly shows that and that can inform what we're talking about today with regard to the graves that are being discovered in Residential Schools and understanding the mortality that went on and contextualizing that.

For some people, Dr. Bryce is a hero. And for other people, most people, they don't know who he is. This is an issue that needs to be brought up in terms of education. We need to know more about Dr. Bryce and his role and by extension, the message that was being sent to the federal government. Being told something and not acting on that is when we start to think about culpability. There's no plausible deniability when your own doctors actually tell you. He was seen as an impediment to the system and to maintaining the system rather than someone legitimately informing the public and the government.

Unfortunately, the circumstances were that he could be suppressed, that his message didn't get out in a way that meaningfully changed policy. That's the shame of it all, is that we had the information, we didn't act on the information.

NARRATOR

As Cindy stated earlier, Duncan Campbell Scott was responsible for a lot of the inaction.

PAUL HACKETT

He was critical in the development

of the Residential School System. He was also critical in ignoring the tuberculosis problem - issue within the school system. He was not going to spend money on this. And by not spending money, the system perpetuated the TB disaster within the schools.

His attitude was very consistent among people in Ottawa, that the First Nations People were weak, that they were susceptible to tuberculosis, that the only way that would change is if you sort of burned through them like a forest fire leaving only the strong to survive, a kind of Darwinian philosophy. In other words, it absolved the federal government of any responsibility. This becomes the sort of policy of the federal government. It wasn't the policy in the United States. They recognized that there are social causes of tuberculosis. We may choose not to intervene if we don't have the money or the will, or we actually like the outcome. But the intervention was actually possible. The difference between a genetic explanation and a social explanation for the high rates of tuberculosis was critical in setting policy.

NARRATOR

Duncan Campbell Scott maintained the position that there was nothing to be done. Paul Hackett calls this the "policy of neglect" around tuberculosis care for Indigenous peoples for years to come.

Everyone should look at the section on the history of the schools in the 1907 report because even Bryce expressed discriminatory beliefs of the time about First Nations. He says that people would still be savages had it not been for the devotion of the missionaries. But he didn't believe that the perceived differences warranted transmission of disease and mass death of children.

MUSIC

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

What did people reading the paper have to say? Well, one of those people was a lawyer and later a judge, Samuel Hume Blake. In 1908, he said that if Canada fails to obviate the preventable causes of death, it brings itself into unpleasant nearness with manslaughter. What did Canada do? Did that kind of awaken everybody? "Oh, we better get busy saving these kids' lives"? No, they retaliated against Dr. Bryce. They cut all of his research funding. They blocked him from presenting his findings to the public, and they tried to go after his reputation. They would stonewall him and make sure he was never Canada's public health officer. That far lesser qualified people were promoted in the system. All of this is against his conscience. He is a man of medicine. His memory of him being a failure in terms of not being able to do the Hippocratic Oath, which is something he swore to do as a doctor, that kind of was a looming cloud in the family history.

NARRATOR

The government and public knew about the report, but did they not care? Saturday Night Magazine considered this dilemma in 1907:

MALE VOICE

"Many will scan the title on the cover, some will open it, a few will read it and so the thing will drift along another year. [...] Unless public opinion takes the question up and forces it to the front. Then Parliament will show a quick interest, pigeonholes will give up their dusty contents, medical officers will have a wealth of suggestions and the scandalous procession of Indian children to school and on to the cemetery may possibly be stopped."

NARRATOR

We need to be careful when we talk about governmental failure to enact

policy change. As Cindy Blackstock reminds us, the government made a conscious choice not to implement Bryce's recommendations, they didn't fail because they didn't try.

Here's Cindy again.

CINDY BLACKSTOCK

And what has happened in Canadian history is what I call whitewashing, which is to take those people who were standing up against these egregious behaviors. Who could see these contradictions, who could see First Nations, Métis and Inuit as people and were saying, "No, this is wrong." We erased all those people from history. And the reason we erase it is that it allows us to be able to say of John A. MacDonald, "Well, you know, he may have had a few flaws, but people were different back then." It allows us to say, "Well, we're good people today. The reason that Residential Schools happened is that, you know, people didn't know any better back then."

NARRATOR

The Story of a National Crime Podcast is written and produced by me, Maia Foster-Sanchez, and presented by Knockabout Media. It is co-produced by Ryan Barnett with additional voices by Gabriel Maracle.

If you are a Residential School Survivor or Intergenerational Survivor, you can access support through the National Indian Residential School Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419. Mental health and crisis support is also available through Hope 4 Wellness at 1-855-242-3310.

Our series advisors are Teresa Edwards, Kaila Johnston, and Erin Millions.

This episode featured interviews with Cindy Blackstock, Teresa Edwards, Paul Hackett, Erin Millions, Kaila Johnston, and Anne Lindsay.

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For a list of sources used in this episode and to download the listening guide, visit nationalcrimepod.ca.

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On the next episode:

MUSIC

ANNE LINDSAY

His Story of a National Crime, in particular, framed the picture of tuberculosis in the schools as a national issue, as the business of Canada, and of all Canadians. If the government had acted on Bryce's reports, it's possible that there would have been far fewer people requiring hospitalization in the period our work focuses on.