

Canadian Exceptionalism

Canada is a country which is explored by many for its beautiful landscapes, it is also known to be welcoming, progressive, and multicultural. Unfortunately, Canada wasn't always welcoming to new immigrants, making unforgettable, traumatizing memories for families. Canada has revealed a dark past, but together as a country Canada is making up for its past actions. It is for this reason that leads one to believe Canada is exceptional. When one looks back at the horrendous mistakes done by Canada, the residential schools and the treatment of Sikh migrants onboard the Komagata Maru are two examples of when Canada wasn't exceptional.

One, nowadays, can't fully imagine being removed from your house and family, at a young age, to be taken to a residential school. These schools were government sponsored religious schools which were established to assimilate indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture and society. The indigenous kids were not allowed to speak their native language, keep any valuables from back home, and continue with their beliefs/religion of their culture. The purpose of the residential schools at first, was to be a safe learning place where indigenous kids could go to be a part of Canadian society until 1894. In 1894, the Canadian parliament passed the Indian Act of 1876, declaring that all First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children attend residential schools. The quality of education and safety in the schools was poor. Early schools were insufficient, mismanaged, and underfunded. Most of the time, the residential schools were in horrific living conditions making it easier for diseases to spread rapidly.



These kids were receiving terrible education, in addition to getting abused by staff members physically and/or verbally. Life at a residential school was frightening. It wasn't until the late 1950's that the system was to attend school for half of the day and work for the rest. The theory to this half-day system was so the kids could get educated and learn skills they would need when becoming adults. Tasks were separated by genders; girls would do any

housekeeping, for example laundry, cooking and sewing, while the boys did construction, general maintenance and agricultural labour. When the holidays came up, most of the kids had to stay at school and they couldn't see their families for several years; however, in the 1960's the government sent them all back home. Citizens started to get furious with the residential schools in the mid 1900's and the Church participation ended in the 1960's. Indigenous students and parents started to protest for no more residential schools. The last Canadian residential school was in Saskatchewan which closed in 1996. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The



settlement resolved lawsuits filed from former residential schools. In 2008, the Canadian government, represented by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, formally apologized for the nation's role in the physical and emotional suffering the indigenous families had to go through. To this day, Canada as a nation remembers all the families that went through this awful past by wearing an orange shirt on September 30th as well as celebrating Aboriginal culture, artwork, stories and recognizing their land. Horrifying actions were made in the past



but now

Canada is a country working hard on exceptionalism as it is learning and trying to make up from past mistakes.



In the spring and summer of 1914, a ship called the Komagata Maru arrived at the Port of Vancouver with 376 prospective South Asian immigrants hoping to settle in Canada. The passengers were not welcomed as they had hoped. In fact, Gurdit Singh and his lieutenants knew that Canada had been rejecting immigrants, specifically from South Asia for the previous six years. Regardless of this, they still wanted to try for entry. It ended up being a long, tragic and



physical confrontation with Canadian officials, police, and military from the Port of Vancouver. The Canadian government placed limitations on South Asian immigrants through racially restrictive policies. The first policy stated that any immigrant could come if they had traveled from their country directly to Canada,

also known as a "continuous journey"; this policy was directly targeted on South Asian migrants. Secondly, the other restrictive policy was that immigrants had to pay at least \$200 entry to Canada and many people couldn't afford the entry fee. Immigration officials did not allow the ship to dock while the passengers were isolated onboard and unable to communicate with the South Asian community on shore. Passengers had Punjabi and other South Asian friends on shore

who hired lawyers on their behalf. The lawyers fought to negotiate with the officials to send out food and water when it became desperate on board, while also fighting to change the restrictive immigration laws. The Komagata Maru passengers stood their ground, singing patriotic songs and reading from Sikh scripture. Later, both sides agreed to take a case to the British Columbia Court



of Appeal. The court found no principle in Canadian or British law that gave the passengers a right of entry. On July 23, 1914 the Komagata Maru left the Vancouver Harbour with the majority of its crew and passengers returning to India. In May 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered an apology to the Sikh community and in May 2018 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

formally apologized for the incident before the House of Commons. There are no words to erase

the suffering the passengers on the Komagata Maru went through, nonetheless Canada has learned from this incident and has apologized. Canada was absolutely wrong with its actions but what is important is how Canada has changed and keeps fixing the mistakes, so they don't happen again, which leads one to believe Canada is welcoming and is exceptional.



Canada isn't perfect, especially looking back at how shocking the discrimination and policies for other cultures were. Canada has recognized its mistakes and no actions or words nowadays can fix what happened, however being able to accept more people from all over the world as well as learning and celebrating the cultures is a big step to a better place for all. When one thinks about the citizens of Canada, the first thing that comes to mind may be politeness, welcoming or multiculturalism. Throughout history Canada's culture has been influenced by European culture and traditions. Overtime, Canada has welcomed people from all over the world expanding its population and embracing new cultures. There have been challenges in the past but now it is time to make a better future. In the end, comparing past and present, makes one believe that Canada is a country that embraces exceptionalism.

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