

In spite of all government attempts to convince Indians to accept the white paper, their efforts will fail, because Indians understand that the path outlined by the Department of Indian Affairs through its mouthpiece, the Honourable Mr. Chrétien, leads directly to cultural genocide. We will not walk this path.

Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society*

In 1969, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and his Minister of Indian Affairs, Jean Chrétien, unveiled a policy paper that proposed ending the special legal relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state and dismantling the [Indian Act](#). This white paper was met with forceful opposition from Aboriginal leaders across the country and sparked a new era of Indigenous political organizing in Canada.

What is a white paper?

In the Canadian legislature, a policy paper is called a *white paper*. For many First Nations people, the term ironically implies a reference to racial politics and the white majority. The 1969 white paper proposing the abolition of the Indian Act was formally called the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy.

The federal government's intention, as described in the white paper, was to achieve equality among all Canadians by eliminating *Indian* as a distinct legal status and by regarding Aboriginal peoples simply as citizens with the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other Canadians. In keeping with Trudeau's vision of a just society, the government proposed to repeal legislation that it considered discriminatory. In this view, the Indian Act was discriminatory because it applied only to Aboriginal peoples and not to Canadians in general. The white paper stated that removing the unique legal status established by the Indian Act would "enable the Indian people to be free free to develop Indian cultures in an environment of legal, social and economic equality with other Canadians."

To this end, the white paper proposed to

- Eliminate [Indian status](#)
- Dissolve the Department of Indian Affairs within five years
- Abolish the [Indian Act](#)
- Convert [reserve land](#) to private property that can be sold by the band or its members
- Transfer responsibility for Indian affairs from the federal government to the province and integrate these services into those provided to other Canadian citizens
- Provide funding for economic development
- Appoint a commissioner to address outstanding land claims and gradually terminate existing treaties

What led to the white paper?

By the 1960s, the federal government could not deny that Aboriginal peoples were facing serious

socio-economic barriers, such as greater poverty and higher infant mortality rates than non-Indigenous Canadians and lower life expectancy and levels of education. The civil rights movement sweeping the United States brought public attention to the intense racism and discrimination experienced by African Americans and other minorities. The movement also led many Canadians to question inequality and discrimination in their own society, particularly the treatment of First Nations.

In 1963, the federal government commissioned University of British Columbia anthropologist Harry B. Hawthorn to investigate the social conditions of Aboriginal peoples across Canada. In his report, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies*, Hawthorn concluded that Aboriginal peoples were Canada's most disadvantaged and marginalized population. They were "citizens minus." Hawthorn attributed this situation to years of failed government policy, particularly the [residential school system](#), which left students unprepared for participation in the contemporary economy. Hawthorn recommended that Aboriginal peoples be considered "citizens plus" and be provided with the opportunities and resources to choose their own lifestyles, whether within reserve communities or elsewhere. He also advocated ending all forced assimilation programs, especially the residential schools. (Hawthorn's two-volume report can be read online [here](#).)

Based on Hawthorn's recommendations, Chrétien decided to amend the Indian Act. The federal government began a national program of consultation with First Nations communities across Canada. The government distributed the informational booklet *Choosing a Path* to reserve communities, organized community meetings, and in May 1969 brought regional Aboriginal representatives to Ottawa for a nationwide meeting. During these consultations, First Nations representatives consistently expressed concern about Aboriginal and treaty rights, title to the land, self-determination, and access to education and health care.

In June 1969, Ottawa, in answer to the consultations, produced their white paper proposing to dismantle Indian Affairs.

Rose Charlie



Rose Charlie describing her reaction to the White Paper proposal in 1969.

Responses to the white paper

Aboriginal people across Canada were shocked. The white paper failed to address the concerns raised by their leaders during the consultation process. It contained no provisions to recognize and honour First Nations' special rights, or to recognize and deal with historical grievances such as title to the land and Aboriginal and treaty rights, or to facilitate meaningful Indigenous participation in Canadian policy making.

Though the white paper acknowledged the social inequality of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and to a lesser degree the history of poor federal policy choices, many Aboriginal peoples viewed the new policy statement as the culmination of Canada's long-standing goal to assimilate Indians into mainstream Canadian society. Aboriginal groups felt that the federal government was simply, as Harold Cardinal put it, "passing the buck" to the provinces. Canada was absolving itself of its responsibility for historical injustices and of its obligation to uphold treaty rights and maintain Canada's special relationship with First Nations. First Nations were also outraged that Indigenous peoples' opinions, expressed during the consultation process,

appeared to have been disregarded. Instead of amending the Indian Act, the government had decided to simply abolish it.

A forceful spokesperson was Harold Cardinal, the 24-year-old Cree man who headed up the Indian Association of Alberta. Cardinal's book *The Unjust Society* exposed for the non-Native public the hypocrisy of the notion that Canada was a just society. Cardinal called the white paper a thinly disguised programme of extermination through assimilation. He saw the white paper as a form of cultural genocide. In 1970, the Indian Association of Alberta, under Cardinal's leadership, rejected the white paper in their document *Citizens Plus*, which became popularly known as the Red Paper. *Citizens Plus* was soon adopted as the national Indian stance on the white paper. Quoting the document, Aboriginal organizations across Canada agreed: "There is nothing more important than our treaties, our lands and the well-being of our future generations."

In British Columbia, the controversy over the white paper sparked a new period of political organizing. With the white paper as focal point, First Nations across the province came together in new ways. They were spearheaded by a younger generation of leaders who, like Cardinal, were university educated and politically savvy. In November 1969, three Aboriginal leaders—Rose Charlie of the [Indian Homemakers Association](#), Philip Paul of the Southern Vancouver Island Tribal Federation, and Don Moses of the North American Indian Brotherhood—invited bands across British Columbia to a conference in Kamloops where they could develop a collective response to the white paper and discuss the ongoing fight for recognition of Aboriginal title and rights. Representatives from 140 bands attended the conference—at that point the largest meeting ever of the province's Aboriginal leaders.

The Kamloops conference led to the formation of a new provincial organization—the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs (UBCIC)—whose main focus was the resolution of land claims. The UBCIC's *A Declaration of Indian Rights: The B.C. Indian Position Paper*, or Brown Paper, of 1970 rejected the 1969 white paper's proposals and asserted that Aboriginal peoples continued to hold Aboriginal title to the land. The Brown Paper would become the cornerstone of UBCIC's policy.

Recommended resources:

Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs. *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*. Ottawa: Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1969. Available online: http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/inac-ainc/indian_policy-e/cp1969_e.pdf

Cairns, Alan. *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000.

Tennant, Paul. *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849–1989*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990.

Turner, Dale. *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.

Weaver, Sally M. *Making Canadian Indian Policy: The Hidden Agenda 1968–1970*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.

Responses to the White Paper:

Cardinal, Harold. *The Unjust Society*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999.

Indian Association of Alberta. *Citizens Plus*. ("The Red Paper.") Edmonton: Indian Association of Alberta, 1970.

Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, *A Declaration of Indian Rights: The B.C. Indian Position Paper*. Vancouver: UBCIC, 1970.

Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. "Our History". <http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/about/history.htm>

The Hawthorn Report:

Hawthorn, Harry, ed. *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies*. 2 vols. Ottawa: Queen's Printer Press, 1966-1967. Available online: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/arp/ls/phi-eng.asp>

Weaver, Sally. "The Hawthorn Report: Its Use in the Making of Canadian Indian Policy." In *Anthropology, Public Policy and Native Peoples in Canada*, edited by Noel Dyck and James B. Waldram. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993. 75-97.