

Canada 150: An Indigenous Perspective

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Recently, I've been hearing more discussion about Canada's 150th Anniversary Celebration and many people are interested in learning about the Indigenous perspective on the nation-wide celebration of Confederation. I do not feel that it is appropriate to share my opinions on behalf of such a wide ranging population with diverse opinions and reactions to Canada 150, but rather, would like to take this opportunity to provide you with some of the issues that have been identified as problematic by members of the Indigenous community.

One of the main themes that has been identified is the lack of recognition paid to the fact that there were rich and diverse populations of people inhabiting this land long before Canada became a nation. Recent discoveries locate human activity in this territory going back as far as 130,000 years. The focus on the 150 years is solely on the aspect of Canada and the age of its sovereignty, versus the inclusion of an acknowledgment of how Canada came to be a nation and on what terms that occurred. The CBC's Anna Maria Tremonti reported, "Lillian Howard [the] co-chair of the Vancouver Urban Aboriginal Peoples Advisory Committee, has been developing the idea of a 150-plus theme for the city. "[The] 150 reflects the colonial history of Canada and the historical trauma that Indigenous people face...Many strongly felt we could not participate in that as it was...but adding the "plus" changed the narrative...it's a "plus" that would represent the moving forward in this period for reconciliation," says Howard, "and telling a truth about the history of Canada and the dark past of Canada with respect to First Nations." (CBC, 2017)

Another central theme of the Indigenous community's response is the name of Canada's Celebrations, namely, that the word 'celebration' was chosen. In light of the nation's acknowledgment of the history of Canada's treatment of the Indigenous population, many feel that a different term could have been chosen. Overall, the opinion is that there has not been a great deal in the past 150 years for Indigenous people to celebrate. It's been suggested that perhaps a word such as 'Acknowledging' Canada's 150th Anniversary could have had better resonance with the themes of reconciliation and bridge building between Canada and the Indigenous community.

How can Canadians respond more empathetically to these objections? I think a good start would be to acknowledge that the history of Canada extends much further back than 150 years and begin to have exchanges with peers and colleagues to ensure that the Indigenous history of this country is included in the conversation.