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## A fight over the word 'genocide' is no way to end the aboriginal crisis

By Doug Saunders

*Either way, Canada's treatment of First Nations is a source of shame. Fixation on the 'G' word can stand in the way of reconciliation*

Imagine if the Turkish Prime Minister issued this statement: "The Canadian aboriginal people experienced terrible suffering and loss of life. Our parliament has adopted a motion that acknowledges the native Canadian genocide and condemns this act as a crime against humanity. My party and I supported this resolution, and continue to recognize it today. We must never forget the lessons of history."

Ottawa would reject it, and many Canadians would be outraged to see their country put in the same column as Nazi Germany. Many would point out the hypocrisy of such a statement coming from the Turks.

Some Canadians would cheer it. This past year has, for First Nations, been something like what 1963 was for African-Americans, and as part of that awakening, the word "genocide" has risen in popularity. In this view, the mistreatment and suffering that native and Inuit people suffered must be seen as a deliberate attempt to exterminate an entire people, and should be recognized as such internationally.

This week, when the United Nations Envoy on Aboriginal Affairs paid a study visit to Canada, prominent native and Jewish figures sent him a letter<sup>1</sup> asking that Canada's treatment of aboriginals be recognized as a genocide, encouraging him to make a statement like the one at the top of this column.

Of course, those words were not uttered by the Turkish Prime Minister. Rather, they come from<sup>2</sup> a statement made last year by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, with "native Canadian" substituted for "Armenian."

The persecution and mass expulsion of Armenians by Ottoman forces in 1915 involved truly grotesque crimes against humanity, a string of atrocities that deserve condemnation. Many people, especially Armenians, consider it a genocide, although this definition is controversial.

Mr. Harper's Conservatives have officially applied the "G" word to the Armenian experience at least four times. This has not gone over well in Turkey, even among those who are pressing for an atonement and full apology to Armenians. Because of campaigns like Canada's, the word "genocide" has become a fixation among both Armenians and Turks – one that many feel has stood in the way of actual reconciliation.

Canada may soon face the same tension. Was our history genocidal?

The UN Genocide Convention, which Canada ratified more than six decades ago and has applied against other countries, defines the crime as including "any of" a list of acts committed against an identifiable group, including not just mass killing and mass physical or mental harm but also "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or part," "imposing measures

intended to prevent births within the group," and "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." You can find sustained examples of many of these in Canadian history, plus acts of cultural destruction such as forcing thousands of Inuit to replace their names with metal number plates.

Were those acts, as the genocide convention requires, committed with "intent to destroy, in whole or in part" the group's population? In both the Turkish and Canadian examples, this is an open question. The Beothuk people of Newfoundland were literally exterminated, in part through deliberate acts. Some Ottoman and Canadian officials did appear to want all Armenians and natives gone. You could make a strong case, but not a completely waterproof one: Crimes against humanity, even awful ones, are not all genocidal.

It feels petty and mean to tell people whose family histories have been defined by cruelty and loss that the atrocities they suffered weren't quite up to the definition of genocide. On the other hand, it's an injustice to truly unambiguous genocides, such as the near-successful mechanized slaughter of Europe's entire Jewish population or Rwanda's mass slaughter of Tutsis, to attempt to apply the term to every mass atrocity.

Nobody wants to be labelled genocidal. Modern Turks live in a state that was created in the 1920s in opposition to the Ottomans who committed the Armenian atrocities. Post-1967 Canadians tend to see indigenous mistreatment as the act of less tolerant Dominion-era Canadians.

And yet Canada's impoverished, racially segregated aboriginal communities are still a source of shame. Progress won't happen without full and honest atonement. In both countries, it may be better to avoid a generation-long fight over the "G" word, and instead to speak officially of "crimes against humanity that some consider genocidal." If we want to end the accusations, that's the kind of compromise that is needed.

## References

1. [www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/what-canada-committed-against-first-nations-was-genocide-the-un-should-recognize-it/article14853747/#dashboard/follows/?cmpid=tglobe](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/what-canada-committed-against-first-nations-was-genocide-the-un-should-recognize-it/article14853747/#dashboard/follows/?cmpid=tglobe)
2. [www.armenian-genocide.org/affirmation.359/current\\_category.1/affirmation\\_detail.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/affirmation.359/current_category.1/affirmation_detail.html)

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