

John A. Macdonald was Canada, in his day and age. His name should endure

To remove his name and instead focus exclusively on his flaws is to minimize his importance

By Patrice Dutil, [for CBC News](#) Posted: Aug 31, 2017 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Aug 31, 2017 5:00 AM ET

In his life, Sir John A. Macdonald was always the object of criticism. There were those who objected to his headlong pursuit of Confederation, who lamented the cost of his railroad and who complained about his drinking. Many criticized the trade deal his government helped negotiate with Washington in 1871; more made a case against his protectionist "National Policy" starting in 1878.

He was pounded on all sides for his treatment of Louis Riel, for his inertia on child labour and for his apparent lack of action on the smallpox epidemic that claimed 3,000 lives in Montreal in 1885. The fate of the Indians — as they were called then — on the Prairies raised hackles on both sides also.

Beyond that, Macdonald was criticized for his management of government affairs, for economic woes and for his bullying of provincial governments. The barrage of accusations never ceased. Through it all, Macdonald won election and re-election no less than six times as prime minister of Canada, seducing friends and foes along the way. His faults notwithstanding, Canada bitterly mourned his loss. His contemporaries agreed: no man had been so influential.

ETFO resolution

Macdonald will survive this latest salvo — which comes more than 125 years later — too. Earlier in August, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) passed a resolution that his name be removed from educational institutions because he was the "architect of genocide against Indigenous Peoples."

Key politicians have spoken against the removal, and opinion polls show that there is no strong support for the resolution.

Macdonald's memory will endure for a number of other reasons. The first: the accusation of genocide is outsized. It begs comparisons with the bloodthirsty tyrants of modern human history like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and the nameless leaders of the Tutsi massacre in 1994. To align Macdonald with these men is to draw an unreasonable correlation.

Context matters. In Victorian Canada, Macdonald's views were part of the normal discourse. He believed that education was the key ingredient for the survival of the Indigenous population of the day. For him and for his generation, that education had to be carried out away from the home, and so the idea was that some children (boys *and* girls) would be torn from their community in order to be fully immersed in this Canadian idea of "civilization."

- [Spend time honouring Indigenous heroes rather than debating Macdonald: Murray Sinclair](#)
- [Most oppose renaming schools named after Macdonald](#)

Every leader in the history of Canada had a hand in this tragedy. Macdonald did not campaign on this idea, though he made a few statements about the policy. It was a cruel program, but it was not seen that way at the time. The 582-page landmark history of [Native Residential Schools](#) makes just a few mentions of Macdonald — hardly the recognition that should be given to a genocidal tyrant. If Macdonald is to be blamed, so too are all those who succeeded him and did far worse in turning a blind eye to the abuse and torment that was visited upon these helpless children.

The second reason Macdonald's memory will endure is his immeasurable contribution to Canada. He dominated politics from the 1850s to the 1890s as no man had done before, or has since. It was through his cajolery, arm-twisting and conviction that he convinced impoverished colonies from coast to coast to buy into the vision of a united British North America whose citizens could evolve without buying into the American way of life.

The third reason: Macdonald has much to teach us still about ambition for our country. His contribution to strengthening the economy, to expanding the right to vote (even [advocating](#) the right to vote for Indigenous people and women), to establishing labour unions, to the promotion of peace between Catholics and Protestants and between French and English and to the environment (yes, he created the first national park) serve as a challenge to us all today to keep working toward coming together to resolve our differences.

Finally, Macdonald's name should endure on all sorts of public places because he *was* Canada, in his day and age. To remove his name and instead focus exclusively on his flaws is to minimize his importance.

Wilfrid Laurier had the right words when he spoke in the House of Commons after Macdonald's death. Even though he did not share most of Macdonald's ideas and methods, Laurier said that Macdonald was Canadian history itself. He was not perfect, and — typical Canadian — never pretended to be. There's no doubt that some of his policies brought grievous harm, but he excelled in his day and age. Canadians should remember that.

To read a counterpoint, [click here](#).

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