

# Executive summary

What does the public know and think about Aboriginal peoples in Canada today? Have non-Aboriginal Canadians been paying attention to the important events that have occurred in the past few years (most notably the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its findings), and has this informed their knowledge and attitudes? The main conclusions from this research can be summarized as follows.

**CURRENT IMPRESSIONS AND UNDERSTANDING OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES.** Most non-Aboriginal Canadians have at least some level of awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal peoples, and many acknowledge this community as a part of what defines the country, although by no means the most important part (much greater emphasis is given to such symbols as the health care system, multiculturalism and the geography of the country). The level of knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal peoples varies considerably across the population, but non-Aboriginal Canadians are increasingly paying attention to news and stories, and most express an interest in learning more about Aboriginal cultures. Awareness of the Indian residential schools experience and its consequences has grown significantly over the past decade, and a majority of non-Aboriginal Canadians report at least occasional direct contact with Aboriginal peoples, whether in public settings, at work or in social situations. At the same time, non-Aboriginal awareness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its conclusions is surprisingly low, even among those who claim to be following the issues.

Some people have positive impressions of Aboriginal peoples in terms of their traditions and cultures, and their legacy as the first inhabitants of these lands. For others the overall impressions are coloured by the tragedies and challenges of colonization, forced assimilation, poor living conditions, and missing and murdered Aboriginal women. The increased profile given to Aboriginal issues in recent years appears to have had a positive effect on the impressions of some Canadians: One-quarter say their impressions are now more positive than before because of what they have learned, compared with one in ten whose impressions have gotten worse. This growing appreciation notwithstanding, the public remains divided on whether Aboriginal peoples have unique

rights and status as first inhabitants or are just like other cultural or ethnic groups in Canadian society.

**ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND BROADER CANADIAN SOCIETY.** A majority of non-Aboriginal Canadians recognize and understand at some level the challenges and disparities Aboriginal peoples face, and such awareness seems to have grown over the past decade. Many seem to know that Aboriginal peoples live with a stigma of being Aboriginal, experience ongoing discrimination (both interpersonal and institutional), and that there are significant social and economic inequalities between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. Most Canadians also believe that the challenges Aboriginal peoples face are not of their own making, and increasingly appreciate that the current challenges are tied to the legacy of abuse and discrimination from the Indian residential schools experience.

This public recognition of the challenges facing Aboriginal peoples notwithstanding, it is also evident that many also believe their mistreatment is not necessarily any more significant than that experienced by other marginalized groups in Canadian society such as Blacks and South Asians, and especially Muslims. As well, Canadians are less sure about Aboriginal peoples experiencing systemic institutional discrimination, although they are more apt to believe this happens in the educational and criminal justice systems than in health care or the workplace. Moreover, there is also ambivalence in public attitudes about the significance of the current challenges facing Aboriginal peoples: A majority rejects the idea that mainstream society continues to benefit from such ongoing discrimination, and also expresses the view that Aboriginal peoples have a sense of entitlement about receiving special treatment from governments and taxpayers.

Taken together, this pattern of views on Aboriginal peoples, and how they are treated, reveals crisscrossing sentiments that counter-balance the recognition and understanding of existing challenges with underlying questions about how serious a barrier discrimination and inequality are to Aboriginal peoples' success in building their communities and well-being.

**RECONCILIATION AND THE PATH FORWARD.** Despite this ambivalence about the place of Aboriginal peoples in broader society, the general public's understanding and feelings about the mistreatment and current challenges underlie a widespread belief in the importance of moving forward to find meaningful solutions. Non-Aboriginal Canadians express strong support for reconciliation, and for taking actions to improve relations between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians.

What actions are non-Aboriginal Canadians prepared to support to develop more positive relations with Aboriginal peoples? First and foremost, it starts with education; there is a broad public consensus on the importance of learning about the historical abuses and discrimination that Aboriginal peoples have faced in Canada. Solid majorities also give strong backing to education-related recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to include mandatory curriculum in all schools to teach about Aboriginal history and culture, and to ensure that funding for Aboriginal schools matches funding for other schools in the same province or territory. There is also strong public support for actions to mitigate the loss of Aboriginal culture through funding to ensure the preservation of Aboriginal languages, and to improve the living conditions on reserves. Smaller majorities endorse steps to cede full control of land and resources to Aboriginal peoples, and to settle outstanding land claims at whatever the cost.

Reconciliation also strikes a chord of cooperation, relationship-building and inclusion. To further this goal, non-Aboriginal Canadians see a place for a strong Aboriginal voice in federal institutions, including guaranteed Aboriginal representation at First Ministers meetings, in the federal cabinet and in Parliament.

The public embraces these actions from institutional actors, but a majority also sees a strong role for individual Canadians such as themselves in helping to bring about improved relations with Aboriginal peoples; and this sentiment has strengthened significantly over the past decade. At the same time — perhaps because of the scope of the challenges, past failures and the slow pace of real change — the public is only cautiously optimistic about the prospects for achieving meaningful reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples in their lifetime.

**HOW OPINIONS VARY ACROSS THE COUNTRY.** While the conclusions about public opinion described above hold true the non-Aboriginal population as a whole, there are also important differences in viewpoints across the country, by region, socio-demographic characteristics and other dimensions. The key variations are as follows:

**Region.** There is a general east-west divide in the degree to which non-Aboriginal Canadians hold specific perspectives on Aboriginal peoples, tied in part to the presence and profile of Aboriginal populations with whom non-Aboriginal people would have first-hand contact. The notable exception to this pattern is British Columbia.

Canadians living in Ontario, Quebec, Atlantic Canada, British Columbia and the Territories hold the most consistently positive views of Aboriginal peoples across the various topics covered in the survey. More than elsewhere in the country, they perceive Aboriginal peoples as having unique rights as first inhabitants, and express a stronger interest in learning more about Aboriginal cultures. The sense of relations between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians in these regions is distinctly more positive, with larger proportions exhibiting favourable attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples when it comes to opinions on, among other things, the negative impact of Indian residential schools, acknowledging prejudice, and rejecting the idea that Aboriginal peoples have an unhealthy sense of entitlement. Moreover, residents in these provinces and territories display greater levels of support for action to achieve reconciliation, including the calls for action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and strengthening Aboriginal peoples' voice and representation in federal institutions. And they express a greater commitment to a strong role for individual Canadians to help bring about reconciliation.

In contrast, non-Aboriginal Canadians living in the Prairie provinces hold more ambivalent perspectives on Aboriginal peoples, and are less sympathetic overall than others to the challenges they face. While they acknowledge a large standard of living gap between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, they are more likely than others to see Aboriginal peoples themselves as the main obstacle to achieving social and economic equality with other Canadians, and they are also more likely to feel Aboriginal peoples have a sense of entitlement when it comes to support from government. For

residents in these provinces, higher levels of direct contact with Aboriginal peoples, and greater awareness of issues like the Indian residential schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have not resulted in a more positive appreciation of, and feelings for, Aboriginal peoples.

**Gender.** Gender appears to be a defining factor in a modest but consistent pattern, with women generally more likely than men to share positive perspectives on Aboriginal peoples. Women consider Aboriginal history and culture a major aspect of what defines Canada, more readily acknowledge that Aboriginal peoples have unique rights as the country's first inhabitants, and express higher levels of interest in learning more about Aboriginal cultures. They are also more convinced of ingrained anti-Aboriginal prejudices among Canadians, and connect the dots between Indian residential schools and the current challenges Aboriginal peoples face, in comparison with men. And women more consistently voice support for recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as strengthening Aboriginal representation in federal institutions.

**Age.** With the benefit of life experience and knowledge, older non-Aboriginal Canadians (notably those 60 plus) are more aware of, and pay attention to, Aboriginal news and stories. Perhaps as a result, they are also more ready to acknowledge the challenges Aboriginal peoples face, including the substantial gap in living standards compared to other Canadians and the frequent discrimination they face, both interpersonal and institutional. Older Canadians, however, also place greater onus on Aboriginal peoples themselves as a key obstacle to their achieving social and economic equality, and are more likely than younger Canadians to believe Aboriginal peoples have a sense of entitlement for government support.

While less informed, non-Aboriginal Canadians 18-29 years of age are more apt to express support for different aspects of reconciliation, including the need to appreciate the history of treatment of Aboriginal peoples, as well as acknowledging the long-term impact of Indian residential schools on current challenges they face. The youngest generation is also much more optimistic about the prospects for meaningful reconciliation in their lifetime (not surprising, given that youth are often the most optimistic of generations).

**Country of birth.** Canadians who have immigrated to this country demonstrate a small but consistently more positive orientation toward Aboriginal peoples in comparison with those who are Canadian-born. Immigrants are more likely to consider Aboriginal history and culture to be a major aspect of what defines Canada, and to believe Aboriginal peoples have unique rights as first inhabitants. They are also more likely than Canadian-born to have an interest in learning more about Aboriginal cultures, and to perceive relations between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians as positive. Given this perspective, it is not surprising that they give greater support to initiatives that make the teaching of Aboriginal history and culture mandatory components in provincial and territorial education curriculum, as well as to funding to preserve Aboriginal languages.

**Distinct world views about Aboriginal peoples.** When the different strands of regional and demographic variations are considered together, what emerges are five groups of non-Aboriginal Canadians, each of which has a distinct world view of Aboriginal peoples with respect to the topics and issues covered on the survey. The groups differ primarily across two dimensions: a) a positive versus negative orientation toward Aboriginal peoples and their place in society; and b) the level of knowledge about this population and the challenges it faces.

Two of the groups (making up 41% of the population) have a distinctly positive orientation, one of which is well-informed (Connected Advocates) and one notably less so (Young Idealists). Two other groups (35%) are much more negative in their perspective, one of them being generally knowledgeable about many of the issues (Dismissive Naysayers) and the other mostly uninformed and disengaged (Disconnected Skeptics). The fifth and final group (Informed Critics – 23% of the population) includes among the most informed non-Aboriginal Canadians when it comes to Aboriginal peoples, while their orientation is mix of positive and negative opinions. This typology sums up the spectrum of non-Aboriginal perspectives about Aboriginal peoples, and provides a valuable foundation for future communications and education initiatives.