



## Racism and FNMI Peoples

In considering the changing nature of contemporary Canadian society, we must also consider and respond to the impact of racism on FNMI peoples. Historical accounts of FNMI people about community life, governance, beliefs, and customs have lacked accuracy. Sadly, what has been written historically has often been based on stereotypes or misconceptions that reinforced the definitions and descriptions of “Indians” in legislation and the *Indian Act*.

The original version of the *Indian Act* defined “Indians” as “non-persons under the law.” The treatment of FNMI people historically and to this day reflects the dominant cultural beliefs of “European superiority.” This resulted in policies and practices that dealt with the “Indian problem” in very destructive ways. For example, residential schools were used to “get rid of the Indian in the Indian child” by forbidding the use of Indigenous languages, traditions, spirituality, customs, and ways of knowing held by the generations of Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. This experience was cultural genocide and has resulted in intergenerational physical, mental, spiritual, sexual, and emotional trauma.

The information about this destructive and oppressive period in Canada’s history has not been a part of the educational system and curricula until recently. Generations of Canadians do not understand why Indigenous people are not “just getting over it.” This statement is very commonly heard and made by many Canadians, which is why teaching and learning about the true causes that lie behind many of the social and family issues of FNMI peoples becomes imperative.

It is important that all Canadians understand how and why racism experienced by FNMI people is both similar and different from the racism experienced by Canadians whose ancestors were from other countries and that came and settled here long ago. Many of the people who have come to Canada from other countries over the centuries did so for many reasons, but generally they were seeking freedom, security of life, and opportunities to flourish, and were to some extent welcomed, although that may have changed over time.

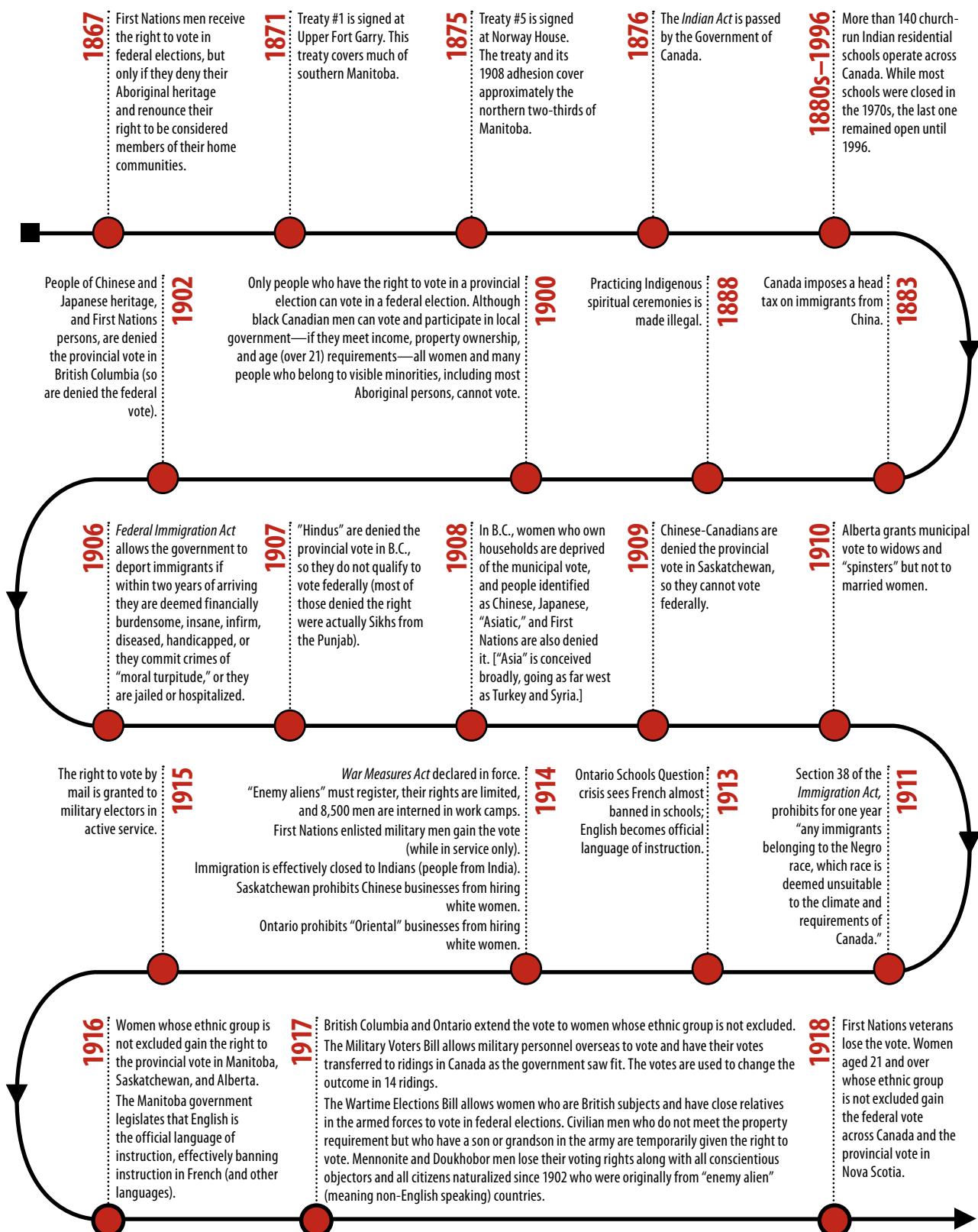
## **How are the Experiences with Discrimination of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Peoples Similar?**

The *Changes in Citizenship and Rights in Canada from 1867–2016* timeline that follows provides an overview of selected examples of how different groups, such as women, Indigenous peoples, gays and lesbians, and people of different religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, were discriminated against in Canadian law and struggled for their human rights.

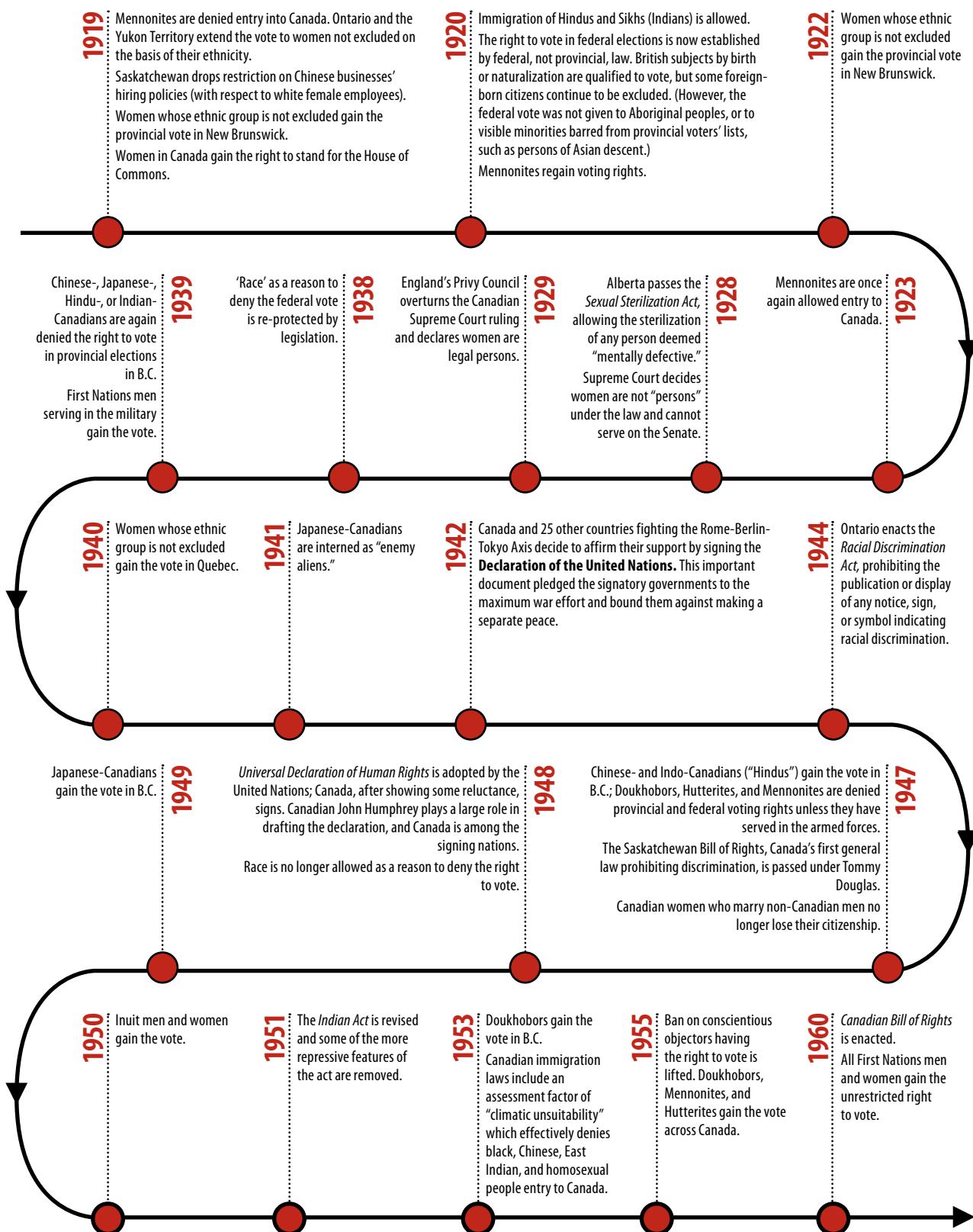
The discrimination that various groups experienced over Canada's history was similar in many ways. For example, citizenship and voting rights were denied, given, and taken away at various times for certain groups including FNMI, women, Mennonites, Japanese Canadians, black people, etc. For example, both women and FNMI peoples of Canada were at one time for legal purposes deemed not to be "persons" and therefore denied the right to vote. However, in 1916 when women gained the right to the vote in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta provincial elections, this only applied to **some** women. Indigenous women and women from some other ethnic groups were excluded.

It also shows how, over time, human rights and related legislation have evolved to protect Canadians of various backgrounds and groups from discrimination.

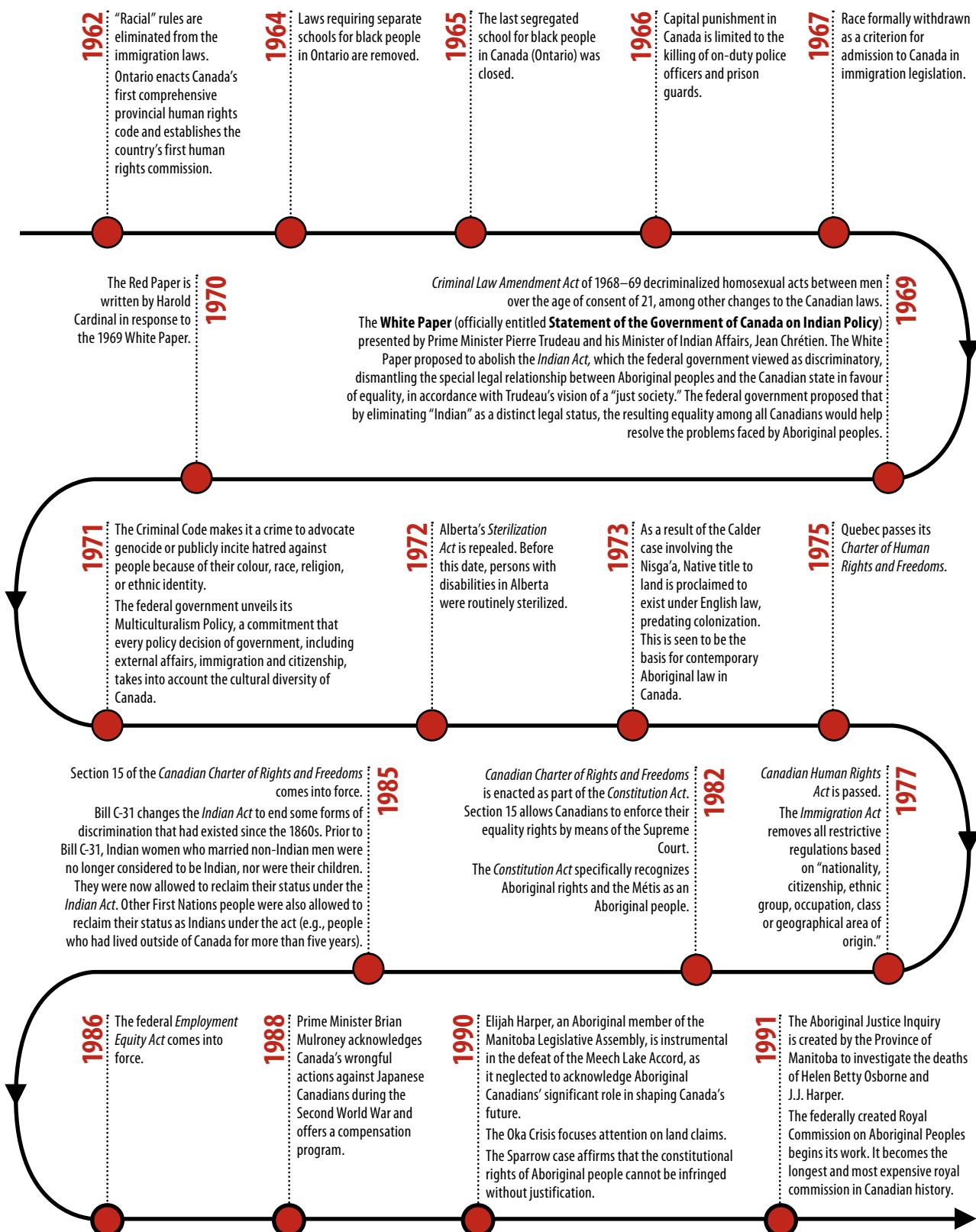
## CHART 1: TIMELINE—CHANGES IN CITIZENSHIP AND RIGHTS IN CANADA FROM 1867–2016



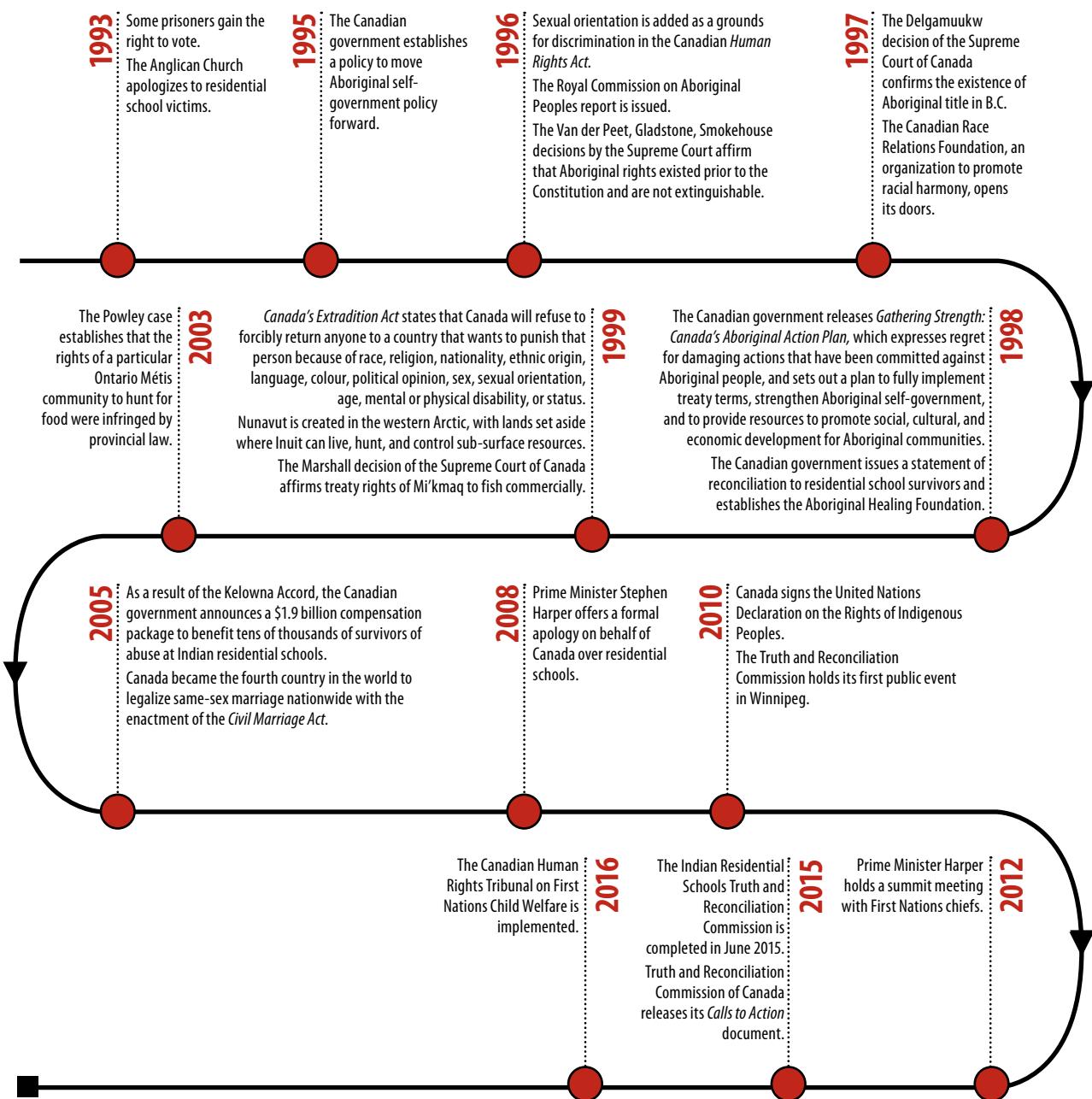
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## **What are the Specific Forms of Discrimination that FNMI Peoples Have Experienced—and Continue to Experience—in Canada?**

Unfortunately, far too many FNMI people were deprived of the very same things that the newcomers who were welcomed to Canada desired and often were promised—such basic needs as land, freedom of religion, safety, and security of life. For example, when the Russian government imposed intense Russification in the late 1800s, Doukhobors and Mennonites experienced major restrictions of their cultural and religious rights. As a result, many of them sought opportunities to settle in other lands. From 1870 to 1914, Mennonites and other religious groups were welcomed to settle in what is today Manitoba and other parts of Canada. The Mennonites were attracted by the promise of land and freedom to practise their religion and speak their language.

In contrast, as people from various nations were immigrating to Canada seeking better opportunities, safety, and freedom, FNMI peoples were being denied their access to land, freedom, spiritual beliefs, and language through the many policies and practices of the same Canadian government that offered refuge to the immigrants from other lands.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights recognizes the unique experiences with discrimination that Indigenous peoples in Canada and in other countries experience.

**"Indigenous peoples face many challenges and their human rights are frequently violated: they are denied control over their own development based on their own values, needs and priorities; they are politically under-represented and lack access to social and other services. They are often marginalized when it comes to projects affecting their lands and have been the victims of forced displacement as a result of ventures such as the exploitation of natural resources."**

– *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*

The psychological, social, and multi-generational damage caused by being marginalized and excluded in your own land, by having your land appropriated, and by having your freedom and rights systematically denied or restricted is immense, deep, painful, and long-lasting. The sovereignty and freedom FNMI peoples enjoyed before the arrival of Europeans was appropriated by the new colonial government. Their traditional education and governance systems, their ways of life, their languages, ceremonies, communities, and even their children were targeted for assimilation, and became managed through oppressive federal policies.

The repression of traditional FNMI spiritual beliefs, systems, and practices was also much more extensive than the repression that non-Aboriginal religious minorities experienced. For example, although some Christian groups such as the Quakers, Mennonites, Hutterites, and Doukhobors experienced discrimination because of their beliefs and ways of life or for being conscientious objectors, largely they had the freedom to practise their religion. Another example is with respect to Buddhist and Sikh immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. While immigration policies and practices may have discriminated against them, they had the freedom to practise their religions.

**"Aboriginal people have a long and proud history that includes rich cultural and spiritual traditions. Many of these traditions, however, were altered or even taken away upon the arrival of European settlers. The forced introduction of European culture and values to Aboriginal societies, the dispossession of Aboriginal lands, and the imposition of alien modes of governance began a cycle of social, physical and spiritual destruction. You can see the effects of this today. Some effects include poverty, poor health, and substance abuse. Underlying these problems is a loss of identity and a learned helplessness from having their values oppressed and their rights ignored."**

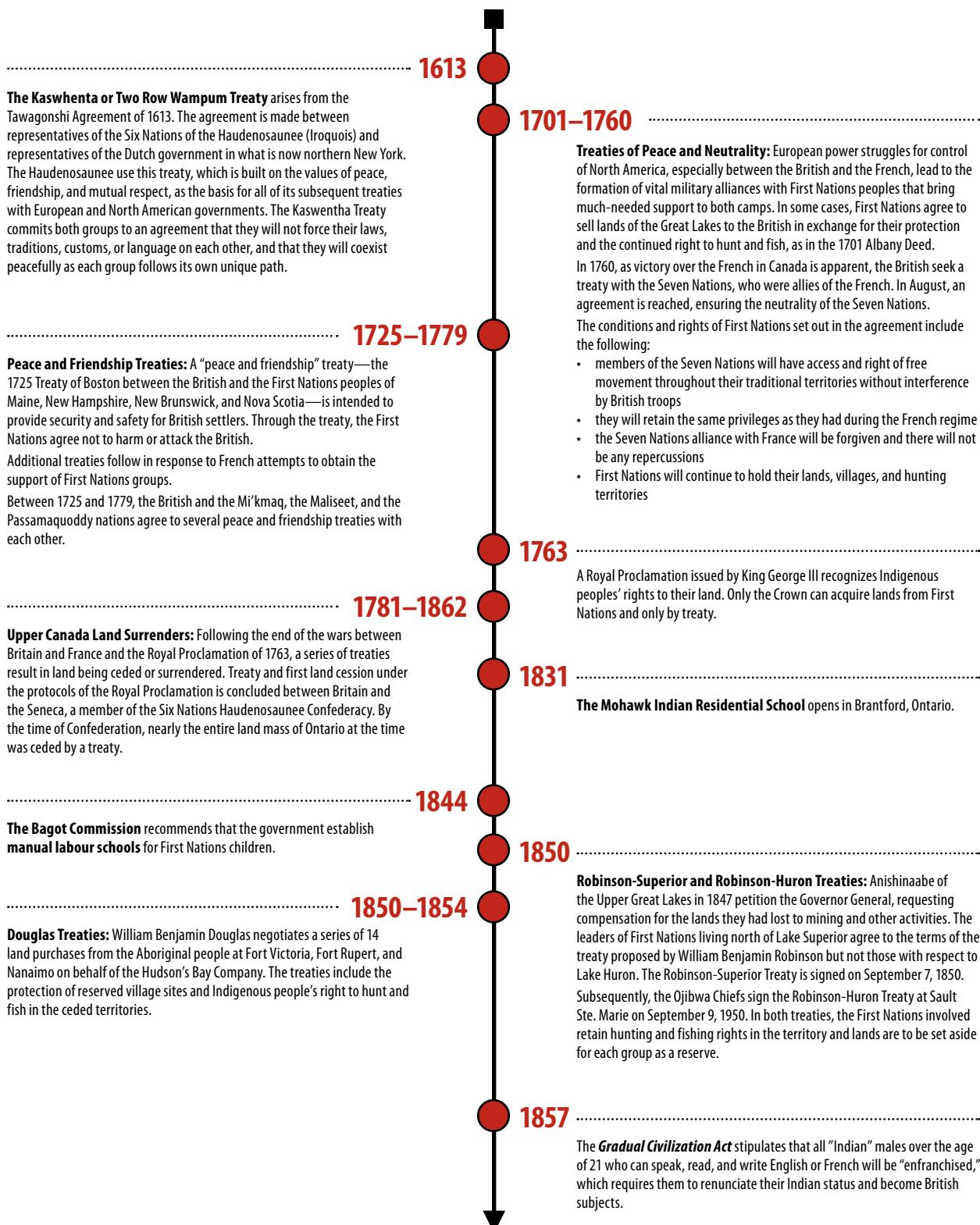
– Centre for Social Justice

FNMI peoples were systematically denied religious freedom. Starting with the prohibition of the West Coast peoples' Potlatches and the Prairie peoples' Sun Dances, or the 1884 seizure of ceremonial pipes, drums, and other sacred instruments, Indigenous peoples in Canada faced oppression with respect to their spiritual and cultural practices.

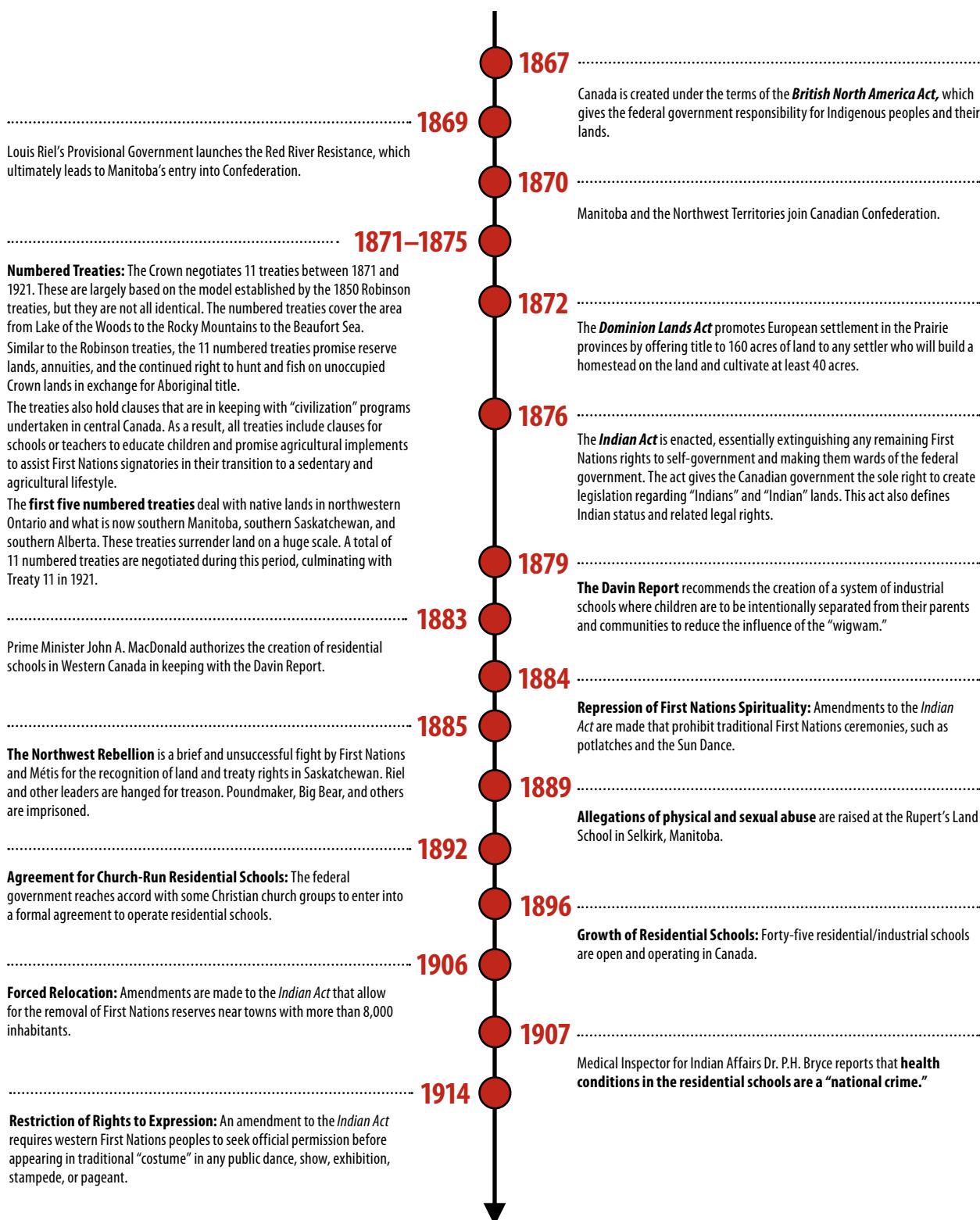
With the passage of the *Indian Act* in 1876, the remaining self-government rights for Indigenous Canadians were denied and they were essentially made wards of the federal government. Historically, FNMI peoples' resistance and struggles to maintain their own cultural and spiritual traditions and to exercise control over their traditional lands and resources were often branded as treason or even "terrorism" (e.g., Oka crisis).

Some of the key events and developments with respect to the struggle of the Indigenous peoples of Canada for justice and self-governance is provided in *Chart 2: Timeline of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Struggle for Justice and Self-Governance*. The timeline chart provides evidence of FNMI peoples' long and ongoing struggle since the imposition of the *Indian Act* to recapture their inherent right to self-determination and self-governance, and the quest for social justice.

## CHART 2: TIMELINE OF FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE AND SELF-GOVERNANCE



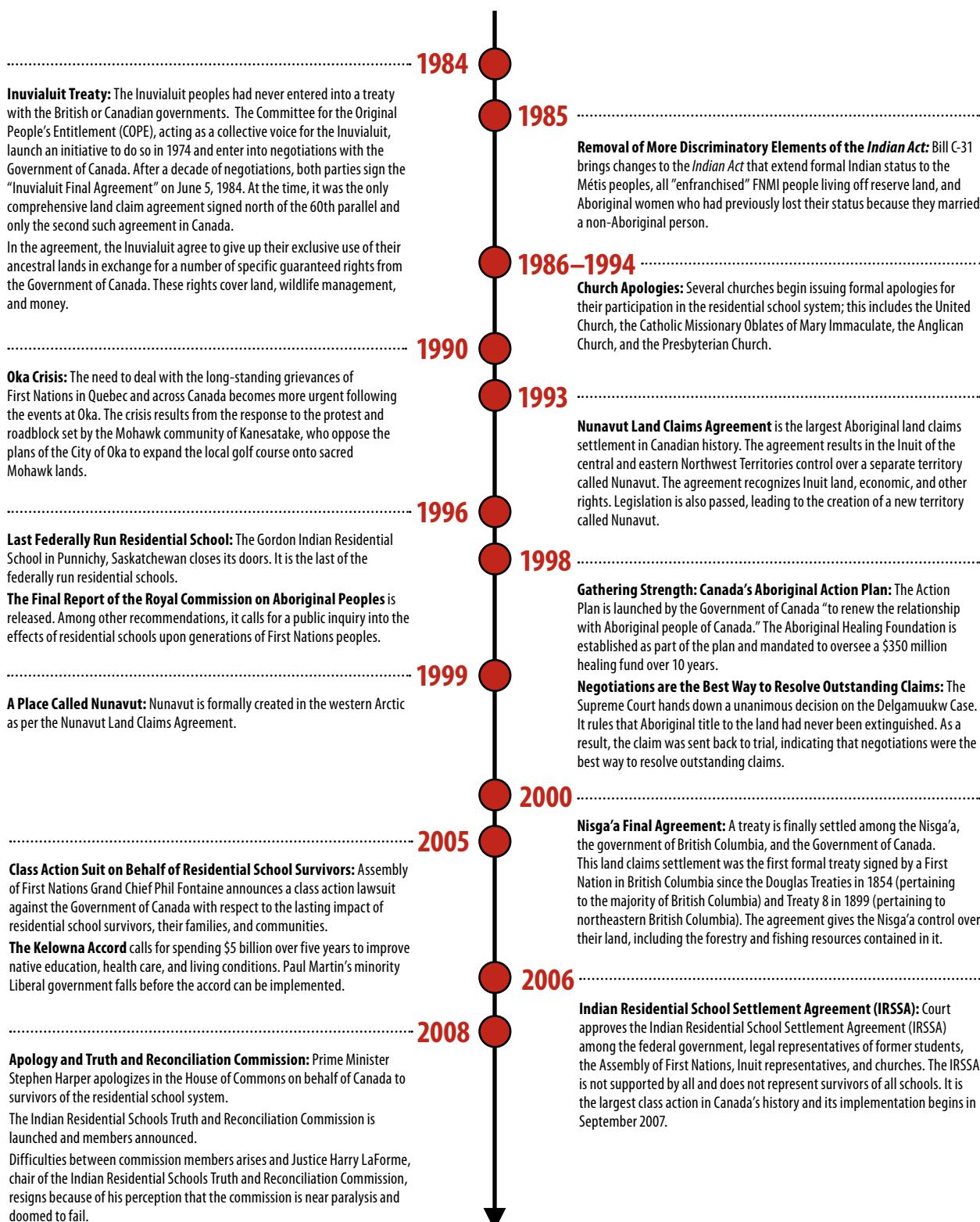
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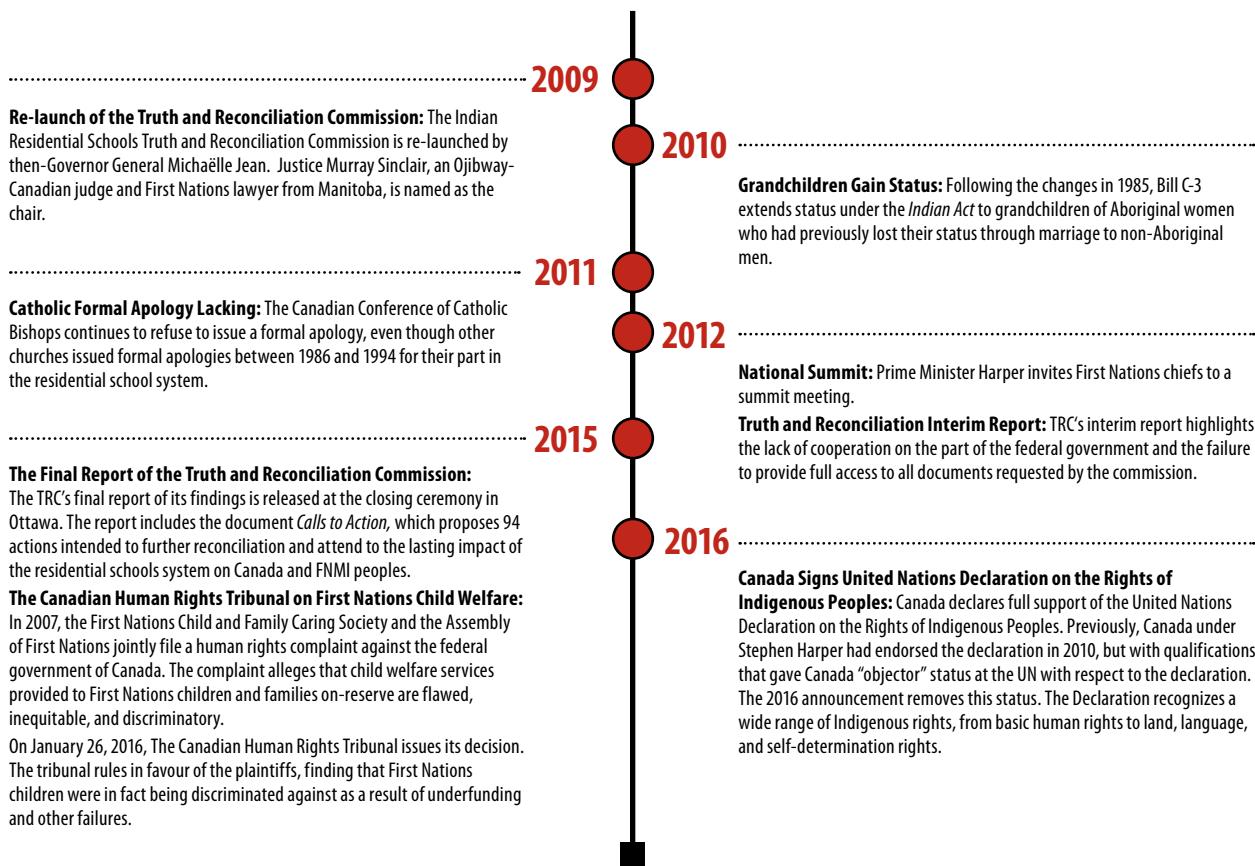
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## CHART 2: TIMELINE OF FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE AND SELF-GOVERNANCE (continued)



### References

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For a full overview of the inherent rights of self-governance of the Indigenous peoples of Canada and their struggle to assert those rights, see *The Inherent Right of Self-Governance: A Timeline* by the Centre for First Nations Governance at [www.fngovernance.org/timeline/timelinewindow](http://www.fngovernance.org/timeline/timelinewindow).

## **Going Forward**

It is time we collectively ask why the residential schools system was allowed to occur, and time we share the knowledge of the Apartheid-like practices used by Canada to get rid of or handle the “Indian problem.”

For as much that has been done to educate Canadians about racism, many still don’t know or haven’t been taught the unique ways in which racism has affected Aboriginal people in Canada. FNMI peoples need to know and understand how systematic racism continues to affect them and their children. This document is intended to support bridging this knowledge gap so that we as Canadians may understand the impacts of systemic racism on FNMI people. The hope is that it provides support to Manitoba educators towards understanding how lack of knowledge can perpetuate the misery and suffering of racism.

It is time to account for the tremendous sacrifice made by the FNMI people of this country and to teach and learn about the powerful and positive aspects of all peoples of Canada. As Canadians, it is important that we know and understand the history of Canada’s treatment of FNMI peoples and how this has affected and continues to affect them and all of Canadian society and its institutions.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report has several Calls to Action for Canada, some of which require education systems to address the impact of systemic racism on Aboriginal people. It is incumbent upon school divisions, schools, and their staff to be knowledgeable about the Calls to Action and how they can influence positive change in their relationships with children, youth, parents, and other staff, and teach in our schools that standing by and letting racism continue to occur is not an option.