



## Circles for Reconciliation Gathering Theme

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### Dispelling the Misconceptions About Indigenous People (Manitoba Version)

*The majority of this document comes from a publication “Indigenous Workforce Participation Initiative,” Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1998, with updates from Statistics Canada, and from “Indigenous Strong, Manitoba Strong: Indigenous contributions to the Manitoba Economy” (2019).*

Many misconceptions about Indigenous peoples in Canada are based on stereotyping and lack of information. These misconceptions have serious consequences and are often at the root of day-to-day racism and discrimination that Indigenous peoples continue to experience. For employers, ongoing misconceptions about Indigenous peoples can adversely impact the effectiveness of their Indigenous workforce initiatives.

Dispelling the misconceptions is one step towards building relationships based on mutual respect and trust. Here are 10 common misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, along with factual information that will help to dispel them.

*(When presenting this theme at a circle, we ask those participants who are willing to read one of the misconceptions. Be sure participants feel free to pass and not read a misconception if they don't feel comfortable.)*

#### **MISCONCEPTION #1: All Indigenous peoples are the same.**

##### **The Facts:**

- The Indigenous population is very diverse:
- It is composed of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples - each with a different history, culture and society.
- In Canada today there are 11 major language families with over 50 forms. Some Indigenous languages are as different as Spanish is from Japanese.
- British Columbia alone is home to 60% of Indigenous languages in Canada. In that Province there are 34 distinct languages involving 61 dialects.
- As of 2016, half of Status Indians live in urban areas.
- There are 634 recognized bands in Canada and 3,100 Reserves. The band is the people and the reserve is the land. The band includes all the people in a community and its unit of government (the Chief and the council), all subject

to the *Indian Act*. A number of bands may have several Reserve lands. For example, some bands have urban and rural reserve lands.

- Not all Indigenous people do Pow Wows, potlatches, smudges or sweats.
- Wampum belts were used as a guide by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to narrate their history while on the West Coast, weaving often performed the same function.

### **MISCONCEPTION #2: Indigenous peoples have always had the same rights as others in Canada.**

#### **The Facts:**

- Only recently have Indigenous peoples begun to obtain the same rights as other people in Canada.
- In 1880, an amendment to the *Indian Act* provided for automatic loss of status of any Indian who earned a university degree or any Indian woman who married a non-Indian or an unregistered Indian. Loss of status was not officially repealed until 1985.
- In 1884, an amendment to the *Indian Act* instituted prison sentences for anyone participating in potlatch, or other traditional Indigenous ceremonies. This ban lasted until the 1950s!
- Indigenous people were denied their right to organize politically.
- Amendments to the *Indian Act* in 1927 made it illegal for First Nations people or communities to hire lawyers or bring about land claims against the government without the government's consent.
- Registered First Nations peoples only obtained the right to vote in 1960.
- The Nisga'a Treaty was only ratified in 2000. It is the first modern-day treaty in B.C. and it served as a model for many First Nations seeking self-government and modern treaties in Canada.
- In 2016, The Supreme Court declared that Métis (and non-status Indians) must be considered "Indians" in the Constitution and thereby fall under federal jurisdiction. This did not include remedial action, but in conjunction with agreements with provincial governments, this opens the door for Métis rights and land claims.

### **MISCONCEPTION #3: Indigenous peoples are responsible for their current situation.**

#### **The Facts:**

Many factors have contributed to the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada:

- Prior to European contact, Indigenous societies were strong and self-sufficient.
- While Indigenous peoples were never conquered, the process of colonization resulted in complete loss of control and dependency. For example:

- According to Article 32 (1) of the *Indian Act*, “a transaction of any kind whereby a band or a member thereof purports to sell, barter, exchange, give or otherwise dispose of cattle or other animals, grain[...] or plants or their products from a reserve [...] to a person other than a member of that band, is void unless the superintendent approves the transaction in writing.”
- Policies of displacement and assimilation (e.g., residential schools and banning of potlatch) deprived Indigenous peoples of their traditional, social, economic and political powers.
- Indigenous peoples are now re-establishing control through a process of healing, negotiation and partnership.
- The Pass System, in place for over 60 years until its repeal in 1941, required written permission from the Indian agent for a person to leave a reserve, to fish, hunt, sell their crops, get married, etc. The pass indicated why they were allowed to be absent, for how long and whether or not they could carry a gun.

#### **MISCONCEPTION #4: Indigenous peoples have a lot of money.**

##### **The Facts:**

- Indigenous individuals have lower incomes than others in Canada:
- In 2010, the median income for Indigenous peoples was \$20,000—compared to \$27,600 median income for the rest of Canadians. While income disparity between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canadians narrowed slightly in a decade, at this rate it would take 63 years for the gap to be erased.
- Although Indigenous incomes rise with increased education, even highly educated Indigenous people still face a considerable income gap relative to non-Indigenous people.

#### **MISCONCEPTION #5: Indigenous peoples have everything paid for; they don't have to pay for their housing, education or medical expenses.**

##### **The Facts:**

- Registered First Nations peoples have certain services paid for. These are part of the federal government's responsibilities as outlined in the *Indian Act*. Indigenous people did not ask for the *Indian Act*.
- When a registered First Nations person leaves the community, access to these rights are limited. And as the federal government cuts spending, items admissible under these statutory obligations also diminish.
- The Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (the new name for “Indian Affairs”) provides certain services to the Inuit through its Indian and Inuit programs. The department funds services for these communities that other Canadians receive from their provincial or municipal governments. These services include education, social services and community infrastructure.

- There is a strong link between education and income levels.
- Only in 2016 was the annual cap of 2% increase in on-reserve funding for education ended.
- ***Nobody gets a free education in Canada.*** We are not subsidizing free education for First Nations people as the misconception says. Their schools actually receive far less tax money than schools for non-Indigenous children in Canada. In 2017, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the gap between on-reserve schools and other schools in Canada is \$665 million. That is even worse than in 2012, when the gap was \$595 million.

### **MISCONCEPTION #6: Indigenous peoples do not pay taxes.**

#### **The Facts:**

Personal tax exemption occurs only in confined cases. Indigenous peoples pay significant amounts of tax every year:

- Inuit and Métis people always pay taxes.
- First Nations peoples without status, and registered First Nations peoples living off-reserve, pay taxes like the rest of the country.
- Registered First Nations peoples *working off-reserve* pay income tax, regardless of where they reside (even on-reserve).
- Registered First Nations peoples are sometimes exempted from paying personal taxes. Tax exemption is part of the federal government's *statutory obligation as outlined in the Indian Act*.
- There are many taxes beyond personal income taxes: income taxes on corporations, and unincorporated businesses, federal and provincial sales taxes, and federal excise taxes. Based on 2016 data, Indigenous people in Manitoba contributed over \$230 million in taxes annually (57% federal and 43% provincial).

### **MISCONCEPTION #7: Indigenous peoples cannot interface with, or adapt to, life in the mainstream.**

#### **The Facts:**

Indigenous peoples have extensive and effective relationships with the rest of Canadian society.

- Indigenous peoples attend, and graduate from, a wide range of colleges and universities.
- There are over 40,000 businesses owned and operated by Indigenous people in Canada. “In 2016, Indigenous businesses contributed \$1.1 billion to Manitoba’s GDP” (MKO, SCO & RDI, 2019, p.31)
- Indigenous businesses form joint ventures (and other business arrangements) with non-Indigenous businesses.

- The Indigenous economy is the second largest component of the major industries in Manitoba, just below Agriculture, but above manufacturing, tourism and mining.
- The Indigenous component contributes \$9.3 billion to the Manitoba economy annually.
- Of all self-employed Indigenous people in Canada, women make up 37%, and even 51% of Indigenous small- and medium-sized enterprises are owned in whole or in part by Indigenous women;.

**MISCONCEPTION #8:** Indigenous peoples do not have a good work ethic; they have high rates of turnover and absenteeism. They are “lazy.”

**The Facts:**

Indigenous peoples are skilled, productive and reliable employees who are valued by their employers:

- Indigenous peoples participate extensively in work-oriented education and training programs.
- In the 2016 census of Canada there were 92,800 Indigenous people in Winnipeg. In the 2015 survey of homelessness in Winnipeg, there were about 1,400. Almost 800 were Indigenous. Where are the other 92,000 Indigenous people? Working, at home caring for their children, their elderly, volunteering, etc.

**MISCONCEPTION #9:** There are no qualified Indigenous peoples to hire.

**The Facts:**

Indigenous peoples have the education, skills and expertise required for jobs in all economic sectors:

- Almost one-half (48.4%) of Indigenous people had a postsecondary qualification by 2011 and that percentage is increasing annually.
- Indigenous peoples work in many occupations. First Nations peoples work in all parts of the Manitoba economy; in healthcare and social assistance, education, public administration, construction and retail trade.
- The growing cadre of young Indigenous people represents an opportunity for economic development in Canada with the supply of new workers, entrepreneurs and professionals.
- Many services are available to help employers find qualified Indigenous employees.

**MISCONCEPTION #10:** Métis people have the same rights as First Nations.

**The Facts:**

This is false.

- Indigenous people with registered Indian status have special rights attached to treaties and their status that are currently unavailable to non-status folks and Métis people.
- This should change with the outcome of the Supreme Court decision that states that Métis and non-status folks are considered “Indian” in section 91(24) of the Canadian Constitution (Daniels v. Canada, 2016). Therefore, it should only be a matter of time before non-status and Métis get similar rights to First Nations people with status (e.g. some financial assistance with post-secondary education, non-insured health benefits, modern treaties, etc).
- Note, this has nothing to do with the *Indian Act* and does not mean Métis people will get registered Indian status or be placed on reserves.

## References

MKO, SCO & RDI. (2019). *Indigenous Contributions to the Manitoba Economy*. Indigenous Strong, Manitoba Strong. Retrieved from [https://indigenouststrong.ca/prod/wp-content/uploads/RDI\\_Indigenous\\_Report\\_12.14.pdf](https://indigenouststrong.ca/prod/wp-content/uploads/RDI_Indigenous_Report_12.14.pdf)

\* This publication is very consistent with other similar documents, such as the 2012 publication by TD Bank called “Debunking Myths Surrounding Canada’s Aboriginal Population.”  
[https://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/sg0612\\_aboriginal\\_myth.pdf](https://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/sg0612_aboriginal_myth.pdf)

Daniels v. Canada, Supreme Court of Canada. (2016). SCC 12.

\*The federal government has jurisdiction over First Nations, MN, Inuit, Métis.