

Barbara Kay: 'Genocide' appropriation makes reconciliation harder

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I won't pretend to professional detachment in my reaction to the MMIWG report's deployment of "genocide" to characterize disproportionate violent crimes suffered by Indigenous women. The word cut to the quick, and Justin Trudeau's endorsement of its use — slightly delayed while he calculated the political cost of refusing — added salt to the wound. Yes, a number of Indigenous peoples have been systematically and purposefully annihilated by Europeans in the past. Those tragedies meet an international norm limiting assignment of "genocide" to acts "seeking the biological destruction of all or part of the group." But the MMIWG situation falls wildly far of the mark by any objective metric. Apart from any other consideration, the MMIWG inquiry only investigated violence to individual girls and women. Genocides generally feature either bilateral slaughter, or wholesale slaughter of men, reserving women for wholesale rape. (--image--)

A picture taken on March 22, 2019, at the Ntarama Genocide Memorial in Kigali, shows skulls of victims of Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

Jacques Nkinzingabo/AFP/Getty Images

As a result, however commendable it may be in other respects, I am too distracted by the report's claim of genocide to consider them objectively. Doubtless many others: fellow Jews, plus Canadians of Armenian, Rwandan, Bosnian and Ukrainian descent — to name the five genocides Canada recognizes — are equally disturbed by the report's misappropriation of the term, and the imprimatur given to it by Canada's highest office. Personally, I disagree with the premise that Canada's often-harsh treatment of native people in the past constitutes a genocide. But that is at least a debatable proposition. Historian Raphael Lemkin, who formulated the word "genocide" in 1943, felt that colonization was "intrinsically genocidal." We should resist that broadening out of the term. For brutality by the powerful against the weak, and forced religious/cultural absorption, is largely the story of mankind, including amongst Indigenous peoples themselves. Where does one draw the line between the vanquished/assimilated and genocide? Where does one draw the line? (--image--)

(--image--)

In an insightful, widely cited paper on "concept creep," University of Melbourne professor Nick Haslam explores semantic shifts in language employed to describe various negative human behaviours that escaped judgmental scrutiny in the past, such as bullying, bigotry and mental disorders, in which "the concept's boundary has stretched and its meaning has dilated." For example, the word "violence" used only to mean physical assault; today we are often told "words" can be violent, depending on who they offend. Haslam points to the source of the shift and warns of the inherent dangers of concept creep: "the expansion primarily reflects an ever-increasing sensitivity to harm, reflecting a liberal moral agenda. ... (C)oncept creep runs the risk of pathologizing everyday experience and encouraging a sense of virtuous but impotent victimhood." One can see the domino effect at work in MMIWG. If racist words are now understood as violence, then actual violence attended by a racist component demands higher-echelon condemnation. (--image--)

Photos of Holocaust survivors taken by German-Italian photographer Luigi Toscano are seen in his outdoor exhibition "Lest We Forget" in Vienna, Austria, on May 8, 2019.

Joe Klamar/AFP/Getty Images

The message to Canadians in the MMIWG report seems to be that Canadians will never be allowed to wriggle off the hook of perpetual guilt. This is a no-win strategy: Canadians will lose interest in and motivation for reconciliation, and

Indigenous people will remain culturally suspended in an unhealthy aspect of “impotent victimhood.” Thousands of years of Jewish experience with bigotry, ghettoization, forced conversion, dhimmitude and genocide offer a better strategy. Although continually victimized, Jews have never allowed victimhood to define them. After every disaster, even the ultimate disaster of the Holocaust, Jews have subordinated the temptation to curl up in grief’s cocoon to the imperatives of survival and internal re-empowerment. Which is why, once Germany acknowledged the full scope of its Holocaust guilt and paid reparations to survivors (but not to descendants), Germany and Israel were able to reconcile and establish excellent relations as equals. Notably, even though Germany is currently troubled by escalating anti-Semitism, including violence, on its soil, nobody is suggesting 2019 Germany is guilty of “ongoing” genocide. Those presiding over the MMIWG report must do some soul-searching (--image--)

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I am especially disturbed by any carelessness in official documents with heavily morally freighted words like genocide, because of the pernicious uses to which such hyperbole is continually assigned by contemporary anti-Semites. For decades, “concept creep” has fed a political narrative that, in a process known as “Holocaust inversion,” has been spreading an international oil slick of lies in order to demonize and delegitimize the Jewish homeland. Israel has been, without foundation, branded an “apartheid” state, its politicians “Nazis,” the IDF “war criminals,” Gaza a contemporary “Auschwitz” and the Palestinians victims of “genocide” (one that, uniquely, has seen their numbers multiply from 700,000 to seven million since 1948.) Those presiding over the MMIWG report must do some soul-searching. The baseless charge that Canada is perpetrating an “ongoing genocide” of Indigenous people is a grave, consequential indictment — and one that has only complicated the already fraught task of reconciliation. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](https://twitter.com/BarbaraRKay)

Barbara Kay: Abortion should be about medical ethics, not Liberal politics

Barbara Kay: I read *The Siege of Tel Aviv*, the novel they don’t want you to read

Barbara Kay: Herman Wouk’s work didn’t just speak to me, it sang