

Documented: 215 reasons we need full disclosure

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Too often we think of our past records as simply what's officially documented and written on paper. Far too much of that, however, is buried and kept secret.

Probably the most hidden and damning record in Canadian history came out of Kamloops with the discovery of one mass grave containing the remains of 215 missing children who had forcibly attended the local residential school.

One still missing part of residential school records are the parent's complaints and queries about their children' whereabouts and their assaults. Those records remain largely hidden and not accessible under access-to-information legislation.

The RCMP is slow to respond to complaints and queries and been challenged by civil liberty groups for civilian complaint delay. It's also been criticized by the information commissioner for being a habitual offender when it comes to answering requests. Currently, the RCMP has hired, at tax payer expense, a consulting firm, Accenture, to find out what's wrong with its access-to-information delivery services.

Keeping residential school records on abuses suffered and compensations offered is a whole other matter. The courts have said in time such records can be destroyed, if survivors so choose. The Winnipeg-based National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) still wants statistical breakdowns of residential school compensation claims kept. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had to fight to get records from religious and government authorities, though they never were given full access to residential school records. The biggest part of their sensitive documentation effort came from oral testimonies of affected indigenous survivors and next of kin.

TRC did uncover records of 51 children dying at the Kamloops Residential School between 1915 and 1963. The commission ultimately determined that at least 3,200 children died at residential schools. That's about one in every 50 students enrolled during the program's nearly 120-year existence though it now appears the numbers of missing, deceased, and largely unnamed children, could be twice as high.

Modern ground-penetrating technology lead to the discovery of the mass grave of children. Modern digitization of Canada's record systems has not been effective.

Meanwhile, it's been an enormous multi-year uphill struggle for Indigenous researchers to get Crown-Indigenous Relations and Indigenous Services Canada to prepare and release to them the land claim records they need. Likewise, it's been difficult to getting fullest disclosure of government records on drinking water problems at First Nations reserves.

It's going to get even tougher to get comprehensive data on proposed projects from small nuclear reactors to adjacent mining projects that effect indigenous communities, whether their prior consent is asked for or not.

In the past records on the diseases that killed Indigenous peoples were hard to come by. Sometimes, it has taken unofficial research to identify how small pox and other diseases were spread and how many died.

Turning to the Covid-19 and its viral transmission, there's a familiar path of suppressing information. Anxieties and outright racism are part of the mix.

Even Covid-19 origins are up for debate: was it lab-created or a result of animal-to-human spread? Canadian authorities are taking a shellacking for dismantling an early warning system to monitor new disease threats which include their impact on Indigenous communities.

Canadian governments can fly all their flags at half mast at all their buildings for a memorial for the Indigenous children who died but what's really needed is full transparency and accountability to stay on board with the public's needs or to help those whose stories and past horrors needs addressing.

Ken Rubin writes on transparency matters and is reachable at kenrubin.ca