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Charlie Clark, Mayor
City of Saskatoon

Dear Mayor Clark

I write to comment on the proposal to change the name of Sir John A. Macdonald Road, as reported in *The StarPhoenix* today.

I am a historian, retired from the University of Saskatchewan in 2014 after forty-four years of teaching and doing research on Canadian history. I have remained active in retirement, working as a historical consultant and publishing two books. Over my career I have published ten books, nine of them on topics in the history of relations between Indigenous peoples and newcomers. These titles include works on residential schooling (*Shingwauk's Vision* [University of Toronto Press, 1996]) and on reconciliation (*Residential Schools and Reconciliation* [University of Toronto Press, 2017]). My scholarly publications have received a number of awards: Officer of the Order of Canada, Saskatchewan Order of Merit, Gold Medal of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada "for excellence in research," and The Canada Council's Killam Prize in the Humanities. The Officer of the Order of Canada was awarded, according to the citation, for my "even-handed and definitive scholarship" that "has contributed to the healing and reconciliation process by chronicling the shared history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians." Given my record, then, I believe I am qualified to contribute to your deliberations concerning the name of Macdonald Road.

The main reasons advanced for renaming Macdonald Road, as I understand them, are that Prime Minister Macdonald was the architect of residential schools for Indigenous children (some critics charge that these schools are an example of genocide) and that removing his name would advance the cause of reconciliation.

In the 1880s, Macdonald was minister of Indian Affairs as well as prime minister, and in the former role was one of three individuals who were key to the creation of a new residential school system. Journalist Nicholas Flood Davin wrote a commissioned report in 1879 that recommended the creation of such schools. Lawrence Vancoughnet was the deputy minister of Indian Affairs who recommended implementation of many features of the Davin report, and Macdonald was the minister who recommended to cabinet the creation of three new industrial schools in Battleford, Lebret, and High River. These

actions constitute the creation of a new residential school system that lasted until the late twentieth century.

But Macdonald did not want residential schools to destroy Indigenous people (the definition of genocide), but rather to acculturate them so that they would become like Euro-Canadians and be able to survive and thrive in a country now dominated by Euro-Canadians. Assimilation was not the objective behind residential schooling; rather it was a means to the end of Indigenous survival and success. It is important to remember that in the early 1880s, after the near-extinction of the bison, Plains First Nations were in danger of dying out because of starvation and disease (mainly tuberculosis). I am attaching to this letter a commentary that argues against the view that Macdonald was guilty of genocide.

There is no doubt that the residential school system was very harmful to Indigenous children and communities. But is also important to bear in mind that Macdonald was also responsible for a number of other initiatives that were positive and contributed greatly to Canada. He was the leader principally responsible for the achievement of Confederation in the 1860s. It is no exaggeration to say that without Macdonald there would not have been a Dominion of Canada in 1867. Moreover, he was the leader (1867-73, 1878-91) most responsible for holding the young, weak country together for a quarter-century. His government expanded Canada successfully to the Pacific Ocean and Prince Edward Island, not forgetting what is now Saskatchewan.

The other point I wish to emphasize is that, whatever its proponents think, renaming Macdonald Road is not likely to advance the cause of reconciliation. It is important to remember that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did not recommend removal of statues and renaming streets and buildings in its 94 Calls to Action. And such action will likely alienate more people than it will please. After the TRC reported in 2015, TRC Chair Murray Sinclair was quoted as saying that such actions to him “smack of vengeance.”

In light of these facts, as well as in the information in the attached, I ask you respectfully not to recommend the removal of Sir John A. Macdonald’s name from Macdonald Road.

Yours truly
Jim Miller

Was Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald guilty of “Genocide”?

The term “genocide” is now widely used to describe policies of the Canadian government that had destructive impact on Indigenous peoples. The National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) report adopted the term in 2019, and commentators and activists now routinely use it. At present, people in Saskatoon are including the charge in demands to change the name of John A. MacDonald Road. The problem is that “genocide” does not describe Canadian government policy accurately.

Genocide, according to the UN Convention on Genocide and the Prevention of Genocide is: “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” To prove genocide, then, one must establish both that there were destructive actions directed at a definable group and intent on the part of the actors who formulated and applied those actions to the definable group.

There is no doubt that Canadian governments from the 1880s onward directed damaging policies at First Nations and other Indigenous groups. Sir John A. Macdonald’s creation of a new residential school system beginning in 1883 is rightly identified as a gravely harmful policy that endured long after Macdonald was gone from the scene. Those who wish to pillory Macdonald might also point to other measures aimed at First Nations in western Canada: the introduction of the pass system from 1885 on the prairies, and the outlawing of the Potlatch on the North West Coast beginning the same year. Evidence for destructive government actions is abundant.

But intent? Did Macdonald take these actions to destroy First Nations or any Indigenous people? Macdonald’s announced intention was to educate and assimilate First Nations children

so that they would become sufficiently acculturated to live and work in and alongside non-Indigenous Canadian society. Skeptics will sneer and say, in effect, “Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?”

To determine if Macdonald’s motivation was destruction or acculturation, we need to review the evidence from his prime ministry. If Macdonald wanted to destroy First Nations on the prairies, why did his government not just withhold all food aid after the collapse of the bison economy by 1879 left them vulnerable to starvation? The government did not do that; it provided some food aid that was insufficient in many cases. Why? The government was using its food aid as a tool to force Plains First Nations to comply with government policies, such as moving onto reserves and adopting farming.

If the Macdonald government was intent on destroying First Nations in the West, why did it promote inoculation against smallpox beginning in 1883? If Macdonald wanted to eradicate First Nations, why did his government devote considerable funds to an expensive new form of education, industrial schools, in 1883, when federal governments funds were very low? Why not just ignore them?

If Macdonald favoured the destruction of First Nations, why did he press hard to give them the vote in federal elections without loss of status in the Franchise Act of 1885? In responding to vicious criticism from the Liberal Opposition, Macdonald said that in his experience First Nations were just as capable of becoming successful contributors to society as non-Natives. Therefore, he said in the Commons debate in 1885, they deserved the vote on the same basis as non-Natives. In the end, because of strident opposition, he had to compromise: the Franchise Act of 1885 gave the vote without loss of status only to First Nations males east of Manitoba. The measure stayed on the books, and First Nations voted in federal elections, until

the Laurier government amended the Franchise Act in 1898 and eliminated First Nations voting eligibility.

If the proof of genocide requires both destructive action and destructive intent underlying such actions, the policies of Sir John A. Macdonald and his successors do not meet the criteria. While a range of his policies did enormous harm to First Nations throughout Canadian history, the policies were not genocide. Macdonald and his successors had no intent to destroy an Indigenous people.

J.R. (Jim) Miller, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Saskatchewan, is the author of *Residential Schools and Reconciliation: Canada Confronts Its History* (2017) and an Officer of the Order of Canada.