

The Numbered Treaties

The treaties provided the Crown with land for industrial development and White settlement. In exchange for their traditional territory, government negotiators made various promises to Indigenous peoples — both orally and in the written texts of the treaties — including special rights to treaty lands and the distribution of cash payments, hunting and fishing tools, farming supplies, and the like. These terms of agreement are controversial and contested. To this day, the Numbered Treaties have ongoing legal and socioeconomic impacts on Indigenous communities.

Their Purpose

Treaties 1 to 7, concluded between 1871 and 1877, solidified Canada's claim to lands north of the US-Canada border, enabled the construction of a national railway and opened the lands of the North-West Territories to agricultural settlement.

Treaties 8 to 11, concluded between 1899 and 1921, facilitated access to natural resources in northern Canada, opened the West for settlement and also secured a connection between British Columbia and central Canada.

Similar to other federal [Indian](#) policies and programs at the time, the Numbered Treaties were intended to assimilate Indigenous peoples into White, colonial society and culture. For example, the treaties included provisions about [education](#) on reserves and also encouraged the farming techniques and settlement patterns of colonials.

Varied Interpretations

Differing interpretations of the treaties have led to disputes between the federal government and Indigenous groups. Some have argued that since concepts of territory and ownership are different in European and Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous leaders did not understand the meaning and implication of such treaty terms as “cede, release, yield up and surrender.” Indigenous peoples may have interpreted the treaties as instruments to share, as opposed to own, the land and natural resources with the colonizers. Errors in translation may have also caused misunderstandings.

Another common source of discontent about the treaties concerns what has become known as the “outside promises” — verbal commitments made to Indigenous leaders not included in the written treaties. In [Treaties 1 and 2](#), Indigenous leaders claimed that the government verbally promised to provide assistance for agricultural development. This promise wasn't honoured until several years after the treaties were signed, following complaints from affected Indigenous communities. Even then, the government didn't provide all that it had promised. Verbal commitments that differed from written accounts in the Numbered Treaties remain ongoing issues of dispute and discussion.

Consequences of Confederation for First Nations

Impacts

The Numbered Treaties have had long-lasting legal and socioeconomic impacts on Indigenous peoples. The creation of reserves, schools and other instruments of assimilation have affected Indigenous cultures, customs and traditional ways of life. In addition, ongoing disputes about the oral and written terms of the treaties pertaining to land use, fishing and hunting rights, natural resource use, and the like, have led to modern land claims.

In spite of inadequacies in the treaty-making process, the Numbered Treaties have helped to guide the relationship between the federal government and Indigenous peoples by providing a context of mutual responsibilities and rights. As modern land claims are resolved and concluded, the Canadian government and treaty First Nations work together towards improving the lives of Indigenous peoples.

Treaties // Key Terms

Cede (Cession)

To cede land (the act of cession) is to give up or surrender the authority to control and own that land.

Adhesion

By signing an adhesion to a treaty, Indigenous peoples who could not attend or were not initially included in treaty negotiations were able to enter into the terms of that treaty.

Land Title

Land title refers to specific rights to a territory. In Canada, Aboriginal title describes the rights of Indigenous peoples to land based on long-standing land use and occupancy. It is the unique collective right to use of, and jurisdiction over, ancestral territory and is separate from the rights of non-Aboriginal Canadian citizens under common law.

Annuity

The treaty annuities are annual cash payments distributed by the Government of Canada to the descendants of the Indigenous peoples who signed the Robinson–Superior and Robinson–Huron treaties and the Numbered Treaties.