Discussion Guide: "Acting Out: How the 150-year-old *Indian Act* impacts all Canadians"

This activity explores the history of the *Indian Act* and its historic and current impact on First Nations and Canadians respectively.

Created by: Jerica Ryan

Source: Bob Joseph, ""Acting Out: How the 150-year-old *Indian Act* impacts all Canadians"," *Canada's History*, Fall 2026.

Grade Level: Upper or middle high school

Time Required: One to two classes (60-90 minutes)

Essential question:

In what ways does the *Indian Act* continue to create economic, social and legal "friction" in Canadian and First Nation communities respectively?

Curriculum connections:

This activity explores the history of the *Indian Act* in Canada from pre-Confederation to present day. It connects with broader themes of governance and citizenship, the impacts of colonialism, Indigenous rights, policies and legislation.

QUEBEC | History and Citizenship Education Secondary III | History of Québec and Canada Secondary IV

ONTARIO | CHC2D Grade 10 Canadian History since World War I | CHC2P Grade 10 Canadian History since World War

ALBERTA | SSN2154 Aboriginal Studies 20 | SSN3154 Aboriginal Studies 30

NOVA SCOTIA | Canadian History 11

Historical thinking concepts:

Continuity and Change, Cause and Consequence, Historical Perspectives, the Ethical Dimension, Evidence, Historical Significance

NOTE TO READERS/EDUCATORS:

This article uses the word "Indian" to refer to The *Indian Act* which remains a legal definition in Canada. Please do not use the term "Indian" to refer to First Nations individuals unless referring to the legal definitions and classifications under the *Indian Act* in Canada. Some Indigenous Peoples still may use this word; however, it is a term that has been historically used to oppress Indigenous Peoples in Canada, specifically First Nations. It is helpful to remind students that this is a harmful term that is exclusively used in legal contexts or by Indigenous Peoples when they self-identify.

With regards to the *Indian Act*, it is important to remember that it is not up to classrooms to debate whether the *Indian Act* should or should not exist. Rather it is up to First Nations communities, and community members like Bob Joseph, to determine what governance looks like for their particular communities with their unique histories and current aspirations. Thus, it is advised that classes avoid participating in debates or assuming the role of First Nations community members/perspectives to reflect culturally responsive and appropriate pedagogies.

ABOUT THE WRITER: BOB JOSEPH

Bob Joseph is the founder and president of Indigenous Corporate Training Inc. He has provided training on Indigenous relation since 1994, working with clients in Canada and across the world. Bob Joseph is also the author of a series of books relates to working with Indigenous Peoples.

Discussion Questions

- What was, and continues to be, the significance of the *Indian Act* in Canada?
- What were some of short-term and long-term consequences of the *Indian Act* on First Nations? On Canadian communities? What changed? What stayed the same?
- In what ways does the *Indian Act* mark a turning point in the relationship between First Nations and settlers in Canada?
- What concerns about the *Indian Act* are present in both historical and contemporary contexts?
- What are the costs of infringing upon or ignoring Indigenous rights in Canada?"
- What connections can you make to the article and your own communities (eg. what economic, social and/or legal "frictions" are present in your community? What connections can you find to reconciliation)?
- What questions do you still have? How might you investigate these questions further? What might your next steps be?

Activity

Introduce the topic by starting a class discussion around the original intentions of relationships between settlers and Indigenous Peoples in what would become Canada. Consider the name of the first treaties being called the "Peace and Friendship Treaties" or read the transcript for video clip on the Two-Row Wampum (also known as the Kaswetha or Guswenta) from Historian Rick Hill (Tuscarora, Six Nations of the Grand River) to help students begin to think about this topic. Note students' ideas on a method of your choice. Invite students to share their contributions using the guiding questions below:

- What do you think the original intentions were of the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and settlers?
- Do you think these relationships changed over time? Why or why not?

- What factors do you think might have influenced the changes in these relationships?
- What colonial laws, policies and/or practices are you familiar with that may have affected these relationships over time?
- How might certain laws, policies and/or practices still impact Indigenous Peoples and Canadians today? What examples might you be able to identify in your community?

Next, introduce the article students will be reading and some background information on author Bob Joseph. Read the introduction together and then create 4 small groups of 3-5 students and have each group read one section of the article by Bob Joseph (Group 1: A brief history of the *Indian Act*, Group 2: Jurisdictional friction, Group 3: How the *Indian Act* impacts economics, Group 4: Melting pot or mosaic?). Have students choose a notetaker. While reading, encourage students to make note of new terminology and/or new ideas.

Have students read their selection through once and summarize their section to share back with the group. After, have students re-read their selection using the discussion questions below to guide their reading:

- What was, and continues to be, the significance of the *Indian Act* in Canada?
- What were some of the short-term and long-term consequences of the *Indian Act* on First Nations? On Canadian communities? What changed? What stayed the same over time? (Hint: think back to the Peace and Friendship Treaties or the Two Row Wampum).

After reading, have students share their responses to the discussion questions in their small groups. Bring the class together. Have each group share their responses to one of the five discussion questions with the class.

- In what ways did/does the *Indian Act* mark a turning point in the relationship between First Nations and settlers in Canada?
- What concerns about the *Indian Act* are present in both historical and contemporary contexts?
- What connections can you make to the article and your own communities (eg. what economic, social and/or legal "frictions" are present in your community? What connections can you find to reconciliation)?
- What questions do you still have? How might you investigate these questions further? What might your next steps be?

Reflection

Students can consider the ways in which they might educate their school and/or greater community about the impacts of the *Indian Act* and how it impacts not only First Nations but all Canadians by responding to the following question:

- In what ways does the *Indian Act* create economic, social and/or legal "friction" in both Canadian and First Nation communities? How might this impact the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Canada and reconciliation efforts?
- Revisit with students the examples they provided of "frictions" in their school, communities and personal lives to them make connections and develop this concept further.

Students should research examples beyond what was included in the article to highlight in their assignment and provide a diversity of examples. Encourage students to use Indigenous community websites where possible to highlight authentic voices in their research. Students should look for websites that use .ca for Canadian content and must use critical thinking skills when considering the content shared from government websites. Students may respond in a method of their choice (eg. slidedeck, social media campaign, PSAs) that aims to educate and engage their school and/or community in this important topic.

Students should be encouraged to make connections between the article and their own communities/experiences and the perspectives shared by author Bob Joseph (eg. local "frictions" in their community, local First Nations or policies/practices impacting First Nations municipally, provincially or federally etc.).

Extension/Additional Reading

Students can explore these topics further by researching more about how Indigenous rights are being infringed upon in Canada currently (eg. land, water, healthcare, child welfare, resource extraction, harvesting rights and more) and consider the costs of these actions on Indigenous Peoples and Canada as a whole. The University of Waterloo's "Indigenous Research Guide: News and Media Sources" provides a comprehensive list of reliable sources that highlight Indigenous perspectives and issues.

Encourage students to connect their research to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) with local First Nations communities and the community in which they live. UNDRIP provides a universal framework for the basic standards that support the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous Peoples throughout the world including human rights and fundamental freedoms. Through research, students can make connections between what is outlined in UNDRIP and the treatment/experiences of local First Nations communities and policies and practices within their own communities.

Additional Resource

The Canadian Encyclopedia - https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-act

Bob Joseph's 21 Things You May Not Know About the *Indian Act*