

Murray Sinclair, 73, Who Reframed Indigenous Relations in Canada, Dies

He headed a commission that documented widespread abuse in Canada's boarding schools for Indigenous children and sought to correct the history of Indigenous people.

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Murray Sinclair in 2021. "We needed individual Canadians to understand not only were Indigenous people mistreated throughout history, but you were lied to as well," he said. Tim Smith for The New York Times



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Reporting from Ottawa

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Murray Sinclair, whose leadership of a truth and reconciliation commission documented the horrors that took place in Canada's former school system for Indigenous children, and whose activism shaped the national conversation about the treatment of Indigenous people in the country, died on Nov. 4 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He was 73.

His death, in a hospital, was [confirmed](#) by his family. A spokeswoman for the family said that he had had a long illness. His hospitalization had prevented him from attending book launch events for his memoir, "Who We Are," which was published in September.

Mr. Sinclair, whose Anishinaabe name was Mazina Giizhik, championed Indigenous peoples' rights as the first Indigenous person to become a judge in Manitoba, his home province, and later when he was appointed to Canada's Senate. But it was his work as the lead commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada from 2009 to 2015 that brought him to national prominence.

Over six years, the commission listened to harrowing testimony from more than 6,500 students who attended Canada's residential schools for Indigenous children, leading it to declare the school system [a form of "cultural genocide."](#) The schools banned Indigenous [languages and spiritual practices](#), sometimes violently, through corporal punishment. The commission found that more than 3,200 students had died of malnutrition, abuse and neglect, or because of accidents and fires; further research revealed that the tally may ultimately exceed 10,000, Mr. Sinclair told The New York Times in 2021.

The commission had been established in 2008 as part of the settlement of a class-action lawsuit brought by former students over their treatment at the schools, which had largely been operated by the Roman Catholic Church, on behalf of the government, for more than a century; the last one closed in 1996. The commission's goal was to [document the largely compulsory system's history](#), and to make recommendations on how Canadians could reconcile with Indigenous people.

But its leaders had quarreled over how to achieve its mission until Mr. Sinclair was brought in to replace them.

He streamlined the commission's operations: Rather than summon witnesses to its headquarters in Winnipeg, it traveled to hear people around the country. And rather than wait to present their testimony in a final report, Mr. Sinclair formed a social media team that [regularly posted videos online](#).

He also decided from the outset that the recommendations would be directed not just at governments but also at all citizens. And he replaced the term "recommendations" with "calls to action."

Much of the testimony was emotionally fraught, including descriptions of the remains of babies born to Indigenous girls who had been raped by priests being burned in school incinerators.

"We needed individual Canadians to understand not only were Indigenous people mistreated throughout history, but you were lied to as well," Mr. Sinclair

told The Times in another interview in 2021. “You were told a story about the early development of this nation that deliberately excluded the true story of Indigenous people.”

The testimony shocked many Canadians. The commission’s [94 “calls to action”](#) included commemorating the school’s students, acknowledging Indigenous rights and languages in law, making adjustments to the justice and child welfare systems, and bringing equality to health care.

They became a manifesto for many Indigenous people, and Justin Trudeau made fulfilling all 94 a priority when he became prime minister in 2015.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada, left, in 2022 with Mr. Sinclair on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a federal holiday. Credit...Patrick Doyle/Reuters

A [tally by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#) counts only 13 of the actions as completed and 63 as in progress. But the actions are frequently cited in land claim negotiations by Indigenous people, when drafting legislation and in court cases. One small if significantly meaningful effect is that public gatherings in Canada frequently begin with an acknowledgment that they are being held on Indigenous territory.

[Calvin Murray Sinclair](#) was born on Jan. 24, 1951, in Selkirk, in western Manitoba, to Henry and Florence (Mason) Sinclair. Murray’s mother died of a stroke when he was 1 year old, and he and his three siblings were left in the care of his grandparents, Jim and Catherine Sinclair, and their six daughters.

Murray’s father, Henry Sinclair, and his brothers had been abused at a residential school run by the Catholic Church. When their mother tried to move them to one operated by the Anglican Church, the government refused. Henry’s parents then abandoned their official Indigenous status and moved the family from their reserve to Selkirk, where the children attended public schools.

Despite that experience, Catherine Sinclair wanted Murray to become a Roman Catholic priest. But he had been a star athlete in school, and he chose instead to study physical education at the University of Manitoba.

He quit his studies after two years, when his grandmother fell ill, and took a job running children's sports programs at a Native community center, where he was drawn to activism and developed an interest in politics. Both led to his return to school to study law.

Mr. Sinclair practiced law for eight years and found it almost unbearable at times. He often encountered overt racism, including from judges. Jail and court officials twice assumed he was the person on trial. Frustrated, Mr. Sinclair felt he was becoming co-opted by the non-Indigenous establishment while making little difference.

He was on the verge of quitting law to take up his father's profession, carpentry, when his wife, Katherine Morrisseau-Sinclair, suggested he meet with Angus Merrick, an elder from the Long Plain First Nation. The men spent most of a day talking, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea in a tepee.

"He said that if you go and become a carpenter, you'll always be a carpenter who knows the law, and people will always come to you and ask you questions," Mr. Sinclair recalled being told. "It's not like you can turn your back on your knowledge."

He stayed with the law. He was appointed to the Provincial Court of Manitoba in 1988 and later elevated to the Court of Queen's Bench.

Not long after he joined the provincial court, Mr. Sinclair was part of a provincial commission that [examined how the justice system](#) in Manitoba treated Indigenous people. The commission documented widespread discrimination and inequities. Ultimately its findings led to reforms that required judges nationwide to consider background factors, like residential school experiences, when sentencing Indigenous offenders.

Ms. Morrisseau-Sinclair died in June after a long illness. Mr. Sinclair is survived by their children, Niigaan, Dené, Gazheek, Miskodagaaginkwe and Kizhay Wahdizi Quay; five grandchildren; and a sister, Dianne Sinclair.

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/14/world/canada/murray-sinclair-dead.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_yogu_20241115&instance_id=139754&nl=your-places:-global-update®i_id=177901256&segment_id=183293&user_id=eac38c6faf1f143145c18ad20dab966b