



# BRIEFING DOCUMENTS

## Two-Spirit/Indigenous LGBTQ People and the Purge

By Albert McLeod

On November 28, 2017, Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, apologized to LGBTQ2 Canadians<sup>i</sup> for the historic harms perpetrated by the state. A year earlier, the Prime Minister named MP Randy Boissonnault as special advisor on LGBTQ2 issues. The role involved advising Trudeau "on the development and co-ordination of the Government of Canada's LGBTQ2 agenda" including protecting LGBT rights in Canada and addressing both present and historical discrimination.<sup>ii</sup> A LGBTQ2 Secretariat was also established, Budget 2017 set aside \$3.6 million over three years for the LGBTQ2 Secretariat within the Privy Council Office. Its activities include working with LGBTQ2 stakeholders across the country.

The attachment of the number "2" (Two-Spirit) to the internationally recognized LGBTQ acronym was a seminal moment for many Indigenous LGBTQ/Two-Spirit activists. It was the first time in Canada's 150-year colonial history that Indigenous LGBTQ people were formally acknowledged to exist within the state. Since the inception of Canada's first parliament in 1867, Indigenous LGBTQ people had been federally governed under the following political parties: thirteen Liberal, five historical-Conservative, five Liberal-Conservative, four Progressive Conservative, one Unionist, and one modern-Conservative. Due to the heteronormative, patriarchal construction of Canada's social and political mores in this period, any mention of LGBT people was prohibited unless it was a criminal matter. The political recognition of Indigenous LGBTQ people was an impossibility.

Generally, the awareness of the Indigenous LGBTQ people in the Americas was documented by anthropologists and academic researchers like Matilda Coxe Stevenson who knew and wrote about the Zuni lhamana, We'wha, who lived from 1849-1896<sup>iii</sup>. However, the depth of this understanding was not evident in mainstream Canadian settler society. The state, in collaboration with five Christian churches,<sup>iv</sup> instituted the Indian Residential School (IRS) era that worked to erase Indigenous constructions of gender inclusion that did not align with that of Euro-Christian beliefs. The entrenched homophobia and transphobia inherent in Indian Residential Schools eventually eroded Indigenous social acceptance of diverse gender identities and same-sex relationships.

In 1975, Randy Burns and Barbara Cameron organized the first North American Indigenous LGBTQ group, Gay American Indians, in San Francisco. The establishment of this group was a result of Indigenous LGBTQ people migrating to urban centres from rural towns and reservations to find acceptance in gay neighbourhoods and bars. Perhaps, for the first time in over one-hundred years, Indigenous LGBTQ people began to self-identify as LGBT. During

this period, LGBT people of colour experienced stigma, discrimination, and racism from the broader gay community and in many cases existed on the fringes of the gay culture.

The AIDS epidemic among gay men in the early 1980s was another impetus for Indigenous LGBT people to organize to create culturally safe spaces and community supports. In 1986, the Nichiwakan Native Gay Society (now known as the Two-Spirited People of Manitoba) was founded in Winnipeg and the 2-Spirited People of the 1<sup>st</sup> Nations was opened in Toronto in 1989.

In 1990, at the third annual gathering of North American Gays and Lesbians, the term, Two-Spirit™ was introduced and it was quickly adopted by Indigenous LGBT groups across North America. It became an umbrella term that defined Indigenous LGBTQ people within a cultural and historic context, in that the name came through a vision by Myra Lamee who was one of the spiritual leaders in attendance at the 1990 gathering. While most people assume the “two spirits” in the name refer to a male and female spirit, this is a misinterpretation of what is known as a Spirit Name, a name received from the Divine (Spirit World). Its interpretation is complex and does not necessarily relate to human experiences.

The introduction of the Two-Spirit name shifted the relationship that the broader LGBTQ liberation movement had with queer Indigenous people who were racialized and generally seen as minorities with little or no capacity to function at the level of cis-white gay male activism. Over time, the Two-Spirit identity gained acceptance and many mainstream LGBT organizations integrated the population into their mandates. Egale, for example, uses the acronym LGBTQ2S on its website.

It is worthy to note, that Indigenous LGBTQ people introduced spirituality into the LGBTQ culture, at a time when many religious groups still saw queer people as abominations and spiritually corrupt. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century presentation of Indigenous LGBTQ as spiritual beings is an appropriate antidote to the many generations of venomous hatred perpetrated the Catholic Church.

The reintegration of Two-Spirit people into the consciousness of Indigenous culture and political arenas was evident in the recent report on the Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls which was released on June 3, 2019. The inquiry initially set out with a Federal mandate that focused on Indigenous woman, however it soon became apparent that the Indigenous definition of woman included transwomen and other diverse genders and sexual identities. While the mandate didn't change, the mission included 2SLGBTQQA people who were missing or had been murdered. The report includes 2SLGBTQQA in its 231 Calls to Justice<sup>vi</sup>.

For Two-Spirit people, Canada's Apology to Indian Residential School Survivors on June 11, 2008 intersects with the later Apology to LGBTQ2 Canadians. In both instances Two-Spirit people were targeted and harmed by the state, and in most cases, there has been no redress nor compensation. Many of the Two-Spirit/trans Indigenous people caught up in the Indian Residential School process have long since died because the schools were first instituted in the mid-1800s. The compensation for Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (2006) flowed through two streams, the Common Experience, where students received a set amount for having attended an IRS, and through the Independent Assessment Process (IAP), an out-of-court process to resolve claims of sexual abuse, serious physical abuse, and other wrongful acts that have caused serious psychological harm to former students. It is likely that only a few Two-Spirit former students received compensation from either stream due to the AIDS epidemic and other negative social factors that led to their premature deaths.

The Apology to LGBTQ2 Canadians also set the stage for potential redress and compensation to Two-Spirit people for historical harms through Canada's settlement of the class action lawsuit for its role in the Gay or LGBTQ Purge<sup>vii</sup>. LGBTQ people in Canada's military, civil service, and RCMP were targeted for expulsion beginning in the 1940s<sup>viii</sup>.

Very few Two-Spirit people will be included in the compensation for the LGBTQ Purge because opportunities for employment in these governmental departments didn't exist. Many Two-Spirit people left high school early to escape homophobic bullying and shaming, resulting in a life of unemployment and poverty. However, it is evident that Two-Spirit people experienced another kind of purge. Historically, they were purged from their families, their languages, culture and social society. They have been purged from high schools and universities and places of employment. Two-Spirit people have also been purged from cultural ceremonies and political arenas.

The Two-Spirit alliance with the broader LGBTQ community is tenuous due to the tendency to identify Two-Spirit people as a priority population with little evidence of Two-Spirit participation in governance and programs. Further, the history of Two-Spirit people is easily purged as evidenced in the documentary, *One Gay City: A History of LGBT Life in Winnipeg* (2014)<sup>ix</sup>. Despite having a strong, active Two-Spirit community in Winnipeg since 1986, the documentary makes no mention of the contributions of Two-Spirit people to the LGBTQ liberation movement.

To date, there are now seventeen Two-Spirit organizations under the umbrella of the International Council of Two-Spirit Societies (ICTSS). Many of these organizations host regional gatherings for their constituents. In July 2018, the Assembly of First Nations passed

a resolution to support the funding of 2Spirits in Motion Foundation (a national network), and in August 2019, the Manitoba Metis Federation announced the 2S Michif Local<sup>x</sup>.

The LGBT Purge Fund, a component of the larger settlement, has a mandate to implement four main projects:

1. Create a national monument to the LGBT Purge in the National Capital Region
2. Support the development of a museum exhibition by the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, based in Winnipeg
3. Address the collection, preservation and accessibility of historical records related to the LGBT Purge
4. Work with the Canadian government to enhance inclusion in the federal public service and to improve existing training on LGBTQ2+ inclusion

While the LGBTQ Purge occurred within recent memory and is well documented, the purge of Two-Spirit people from their communities and Canadian society in general is harder to measure and quantify. Regardless, the need for redress and compensation is no different.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2017/11/28/prime-minister-delivers-apology-lgbtq2-canadians>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy\\_Boissonnault](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy_Boissonnault)

<sup>iii</sup> Roscoe W., 1992, *The Zuni Man-Woman*, University of New Mexico Press, 978-0-8263-1370-6

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.anishinabek.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/An-Overview-of-the-IRS-System-Booklet.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Ryan B., 2003, *A New Look at Heterosexism and Homophobia in Canada*,

[https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/wp-](https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2014/08/NewLookHomophobia.pdf)

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<sup>vi</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, 2019, *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://lgbtpurge.com/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://lgbtpurge.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Final-Settlement-Agreement.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.pastperfectpro.com/films/page28/OGC.html>

<sup>x</sup> [http://www.mmf.mb.ca/news\\_details.php?news\\_id=400](http://www.mmf.mb.ca/news_details.php?news_id=400)