

Unit 13: Video 1 Transcript

Q: When and why did the Aboriginal labouring class become sidelined in the economy?

A: Aboriginal peoples embraced the European economy, and I'm going to limit my discussions to British Columbia because I can be very specific here. So through the late 19th century, the railway was built in British Columbia in 1885.

And actually 1885 is a real turning point for a couple of reasons. One reason is it allows lots of white immigrants into the territory after that. So before 1885, it was hard to get here. You had to come around by ship from—around South America or arduous trek overland. Suddenly you can buy a ticket in Montreal and be here in five or six days by train. So massive white immigration into the territory after 1885. The other thing that happens is, all these Chinese who are working on the railway—and there were 10,000, maybe 15,000 Chinese working on the railway—are suddenly unemployed. And they need work, and they'll take any work.

And see, the First Nations had an economy here before Europeans arrived. They didn't need Europeans to survive. If the wages fell or there was no job, they just went back to fishing and hunting, and they were fine. The Chinese didn't have access to those resources or the skills. So they had to take any job, at any price, to feed themselves. So you have this huge influx of low-wage labour, which starts to displace Indigenous peoples from many of the jobs they did before. And then 1885 was also the year the government decides that this potlatch system that the First Nations had here, this idea of accumulating wealth and giving it away, was a problem. That it was somehow not Christian and not capitalist, and they associated all kinds of evil things with these potlatch feasts. So they pushed the government to ban the potlatch. So the *Indian Act* is changed in 1885, and the potlatch is made illegal. So you can see a bunch of things coming together here. The reason why native people went to work was to accumulate wealth for the potlatch. Make that illegal—allow this—. Well, both white immigrants and Chinese labourers kind of make this huge influx.

Having said that, 1885 is still a boom period in British Columbia. So native people are still working and doing fairly well, but starting after about 1900 you see a kind of displacement. World War I comes along 1914, and labour shortage. Lots of men go off to the Front, and they need workers. So you can see there in that period Indigenous peoples being brought back into all kinds

of industries because they need the labour. After the war, a period of, I guess—'20s are a period of economic boom. So native people are finding work. The '30s is the Depression. Native people then start to go back to their old economy. But they find in the '30s that the government has started to legislate against many of their kind of hunting and fishing practices. They're no longer able to use the fish traps they used to use to catch fish because that's considered, by the government, well, they would say unfair. But in fact what they're doing is protecting the resources for the fish canneries, the commercial fishery. Labour is becoming—agricultural labour is becoming mechanized. The—yeah, hunting regulations start to prevent them from hunting all year round. So Indigenous peoples find the '30s are becoming harder and harder to subsist as they used to. And then 1939 comes along, World War II breaks out. Again, a labour shortage. Native people are drawn into the shipbuilding industry and all kinds of non-traditional industries.

End of the war, white men come back. Indigenous peoples are again pushed out. But by the '50s, their economy, their subsistence economy is much diminished. And the other thing that happens after the Second War is the government, for reasons independent of First Nations, starts to expand the welfare state. So we get the family allowance. We got old age pension. We start to get something we now call welfare. They used to call it relief. And so Indigenous peoples, you can actually see the Indian Agents saying, "If we impose these hunting restrictions on these people, we're going to force them onto welfare." And the other thing that happens through the century, through the 20th century, is as white labour becomes available. There's this kind of racist preference for white labour over Indigenous and Asian labour. And so many places won't hire native people. Native people as early as the 1870s are denied the vote, and many professions require that you be a voter in order to become—for example, if you want to become a lawyer, or a doctor, or a pharmacist, you had to be franchised. So native people couldn't do that. If you wanted to have a general store out in the country, which is kind of a small business, so if you wanted to run a hotel or a pub, you couldn't do it if you were Indigenous. Partly because of racism, but partly because the law said that native people couldn't buy or sell alcohol, which of course is a main item of trade in a hotel, in a pub, or even in a general store. So there are all kinds of ways through the 20th century, but from my point of view, the World War II was—is a turning point because after—native people were drawn into the workforce then. Lots of employment. High wages, and then at the end of the war they're pushed out and they've got really nowhere to go but the welfare state.