

## Washington Post: What makes me a Canadian settler

By [David Moscrop](#)

Contributing columnist

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Throughout Canada, [resistance to the Coastal GasLink pipeline](#) has focused the country's attention on the state of colonialism today. The hereditary chiefs of the indigenous Wet'suwet'en Nation, whose unceded land is in British Columbia, [have not consented](#) to the energy project; attempts to go ahead with it have given rise to protests and civil disobedience by indigenous peoples and allies. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who was at first cautious in his words, soon [called for](#) protest blockades to "come down." At one site, the Ontario Provincial Police [has moved](#) in to arrest land defenders.

[Canadians are divided](#). As always, many say they want indigenous reconciliation but expect to sacrifice little or nothing at all to get there. Many Canadians can't even abide being called what they are: settlers.

The aversion of settlers to accept the term is proof that the designation is necessary. In her book "[Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada](#)," the writer Chelsea Vowel designates the term settler as "a shortened version of settler colonials." Settler colonialism, [she writes](#), "essentially refers to the deliberate physical occupation of land as a method of asserting ownership over land and resources." She delineates membership in the group as "the non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada who form the European-descended sociopolitical majority."

Accordingly, I am a settler. So too are those like me.

The fundamental misunderstanding that pervades common characterizations of colonialism is that it was a historical "event." Settlers who locate colonialism in the past may then wash their hands of any association with the dispossession and subjugation of indigenous peoples, then and now. "That was my ancestors," they might protest. "It wasn't me!" They, the beneficiaries of both the past and present acts and systems of colonial violence and oppression, suggest they couldn't possibly be a settler. They're a Canadian! Well, you can be both. Even if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

As Vowel writes, settler is a relational term. To be a settler is to be bound up in the social, political, cultural and economic structures that both make Canada possible and make it colonial. To be a settler is to exist in relation to indigenous peoples whose land was stolen and on which settlers now live, work, love and laze about. To be a settler is to be here now. It's not just your ancestors. It's you, here, today. It's your benefiting from and recreating a system of colonialization through extraction, marginalization, abuse and violence — even if you face challenges paying rent, affording groceries or finding adequate work. Indeed, those struggles ought to make one all the more aware of the need for solidarity and a full accounting of relations of power.

It's tempting for settlers to locate colonialism with John Cabot in 1497 or Jacques Cartier in 1534 or Samuel de Champlain in 1608, and then concede a decade here or there up until some arbitrary date when colonization "ends." Yet the structures whose origins rest five centuries in the past persist and remain colonial.

How else are we to understand the imposition of the racist and paternalistic [Indian Act](#)? [Residential schools](#) — the last of which closed in 1996? [The Sixties Scoop](#)? Blockades and acts of resistance including [Oka, Ipperwash, Gustafsen Lake and Caledonia](#)? Several [noncompliance orders](#) against the federal government for failing to respect the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's ruling regarding the federal government's underfunding of the on-reserve child welfare system? Long-term [boil water advisories](#) on reserves? The [overrepresentation of indigenous peoples](#) in the criminal-justice system? [The killing of Colten Boushie](#)? Unceded (or treaty) land that continues to be encroached upon without sufficient consent, such as today with the Coastal GasLink project? This is not an exhaustive list.

When a settler reacts to being called a settler by bunching up his or her guts and getting all worked up, he or she is betraying a guilt that proves just how useful the term is. Those with privilege don't like to be called anything at all. They prefer to be neutral. They prefer to be the default. Calling someone a settler, however, has the effect of asking the person to recognize their power and position within a colonial state. The protestations raise the question, "Why do you assume the term is meant to be an insult?" It isn't to me. It's a way to describe what is happening between peoples. It's meant to be a call to account. If being asked to accept your place within a system insults you, then it's worth interrogating that feeling and trying to understand where it comes from and what it's telling you.

The project of reconciliation in Canada cannot proceed without an accounting of the past and present of colonialism. Naming is an important part of understanding. Without understanding, there can be no reconciliation. Without reconciliation, there can be no justice. If one supports justice in Canada, one must therefore support naming, including calling "the non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada who form the European-descended sociopolitical majority" what they are.