



Canada's Domestic Expatriates: the Urban Aboriginal Population

By Mark Podlasly

INTRODUCTION

Why has it been so difficult for Canadians and aboriginal people to come to some sort of mutually agreeable understanding of what it means to share this land? How is it that after centuries of sharing this physical space called Canada, aboriginal and non-aboriginal people still know very little about each other's hopes, dreams and aspirations? One only needs to read newspapers in Canada to see that the tension between aboriginal people and the Canadian system is extreme. News reports of violent protests, court challenges, civil disobedience, treaty referenda, poverty, prison populations, and suicides characterize the poor relationship between Canada and its indigenous population.

Aboriginal statistics reveal a dismal picture. Aboriginal people in Canada are:

- 3 times as likely to die accidentally or violently.
- 8 times more likely to commit suicide.
- have twice the infant mortality rates than non-aboriginal Canadians.
- 6.6 times likely to have of tuberculosis infections
- 2 times as likely to report a long-term disability
- in western Canada, four times as many Aboriginal people are below the poverty line.¹
- 3 times the rate of diabetes.²
- 6 times higher incarceration rates.³
- 50 per cent of aboriginal children, on and off reserve, live in poverty.⁴

Policy makers have tried to craft policies to allow aboriginal people to define their place within Canada, but after decades of concerted effort and billions of dollars, aboriginal people continue to find themselves outside the governance system, and at the bottom of almost every indicator of social and economic progress. There is a fundamental disconnect between policy makers and aboriginal people on the definition of aboriginality. Policy makers, for political and administrative reasons, have been unwilling to address what it truly means to be aboriginal in a

¹ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, "Social Development," June 21, 2000, September 15, 2002, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/gs/soci_e.html.

² Health Canada, "The Health of Aboriginal Women," April 16, 2002, August 30, 2002, http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/women/facts_issues/facts_aborig.htm.

³ Correctional Service Canada, "Backgrounders: Aboriginal Offenders," August 2001, September 15, 2002, http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/pubed/feuilles/off-ab_e.shtml.

⁴ Bob Goulais, "Fifty per cent of aboriginal children in poverty: report," Union of Ontario Indians. November 2000, August 20, 2002, <http://www.anishinabek.ca/news/Past%20issues/2000/November%20issue/Nov00childpov.htm>.

modern and increasingly mobile liberal-democratic society.

To government policy makers, aboriginality exists primarily as a politically inspired, 19th century geographically based concept, that is: Indians living on isolated Indian Reserves to whom the federal government would provide all social services and direction. But this antiquated impression of aboriginality no longer exists. Over the past century, the indigenous concept of aboriginality has changed, evolved and grown past the dated conceptions held by federal policy makers -- it has modernized in unexpected ways.

Forced by events and historical pressures, aboriginal people and their cultures are adapting to Canada's changing political, economic and social environments. The most visible aspect of this modernization is the growing urbanization of aboriginal people.

With limited economic opportunities and deplorable social conditions on reserve, an increasing number of aboriginal people have opted to seek better lives for themselves and their children in urban areas. The number of urban off-reserve native people in Canada has risen from a low of 7% in 1951 to just over 50% today.⁵ Given the widespread availability of media influences, it is hardly surprising that aboriginal people, a youth-dominated population, are increasingly headed towards the big cities and bright lights. In many ways, this is part of a larger global trend towards urbanization.

Estimates as to the size of Canada's aboriginal populations vary widely.⁶ Federal census data from 1996 indicates that the largest urban aboriginal population center in Canada is now Winnipeg with 45,750 residents. Other cities have similarly large and growing aboriginal populations. Edmonton and Vancouver each both have approximately 32,000 aboriginal residents, Saskatoon 16,160, Regina 13,605 and Toronto 16,095.⁷ Many provincial and aboriginal organizations believe that urban aboriginal populations are much higher than the federal estimates. For example, some groups estimate Toronto's aboriginal population to be between 40,000 and 60,000 residents.⁸

And given the fact that Canada's aboriginal population is the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population increasing at almost twice the national average,⁹ we can expect even more aboriginal people to migrate to cities and urban areas. But current federal practice largely ignores aboriginal people living outside Indian Reserves.

LIFE IN THE CITY

Overall, aboriginal life in urban environments can be equally, if not more challenging than life on

⁵ Calvin Hanselmann, "Urban aboriginals remain on the outside looking in," *The Calgary Herald*, June 18, 2002, p. A15.

⁶ In the 1996 Census, 799,010 Canadians identified themselves as aboriginal. However many aboriginal groups contend that due to enumeration errors and omissions, the number of aboriginal people in Canada is much higher than official federal statistics. Indian and Northern Affairs, "Facts on Canada: Aboriginal People," June 28, 2002, August 20, 2002, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/info/info122_e.html.

⁷ Statistics Canada, "1996 Census: Aboriginal Data," January 13, 1998, September 20, 2002, <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/980113/d980113.htm>.

⁸ Aboriginal Business Development Online, "The Power of Partnerships: New Opportunities for Aboriginal Peoples and Ontario Businesses," Ontario Native Affairs Secretariat, July 22, 2002, August 15, 2002. http://www.aboriginalbusiness.on.ca/resource_kit/subhtml/chap04_05_06/chap04_1_right.html

⁹ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, "Economic Development," June 21, 2000, August 20, 2002, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/gs/ecdv_e.html

a reserve.¹⁰ Government statistics reveal that urban aboriginal communities are generally younger, predominantly female and more impoverished than their non-aboriginal counterparts with overall health, employment and income indicators all lower than the Canadian average. The urban poverty rate for native people is 55.6%,¹¹ and the crime rate for off-reserve aboriginal people is higher than that of the non-aboriginal population - 4.5 times higher in Calgary and nearly 12 times higher in Regina and Saskatoon.¹² But statistics don't reveal the diversity present in urban communities. Along side depressing social conditions, there are other emerging expressions of aboriginal adaptation to urban life.

There are now over 150,000 aboriginal people across Canada who have completed or are enrolled in some form of post-secondary education, labor participation rates in urban areas is nearly equal to that of other Canadians and social problems such as suicide, rape and violence, although still higher than those of the non-aboriginal population, are generally lower off-reserve.¹³ There are also anecdotal signs of growing cultural fusions, rising individual incomes, and increasing numbers of employed aboriginal people assuming places within urban society.

Even more importantly, across both on and off reserve communities, aboriginal people have quietly established informal networks outside of government that are important conduits of information, family support and cultural awareness. For those inside aboriginal networks, these informal channels are deepening and starting to spread. Tap into an urban aboriginal network and you'll find that native people are informally connected not only amongst themselves in city settings, but increasingly, to their home reserve communities.

Sadly, this growing urban aspect of modern aboriginality remains outside the purview of federal policy makers who remain hobbled by their past notions of aboriginality as an immobile and geographically remote concept. The current aboriginal policy focus on the more easily managed Indian Reserves ignores the reality of the growing multi-dimensional urban populations. As such, the federal government effectively overlooks the role the most educated and cross-culturally adroit portion of Canada's indigenous population is playing in the development of modern aboriginal culture and society.¹⁴

The result of the reserve-centric perspective is that the federal government is missing an important opportunity to engage aboriginal people, both on and off reserve, to contribute to the overall development of all First Nations.

BACKGROUND

¹⁰ The document [Aboriginal Peoples in Urban Centres: Report of the National Round Table on Aboriginal Urban Issues](#) provides a comprehensive overview of the off-reserve challenges faced by urban aboriginal populations. The document can be found at http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/docs/Urban_Centres.doc.

¹¹ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. "Economic Development."

¹² Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. "Social Development."

¹³ Alan Cairns, "Aboriginal Peoples': Two Roads to the Future," *Policy Options*, Jan./Feb. 2000, October 13, 2002, <http://www.irpp.org/po/archive/jan00/cairns.pdf>.

¹⁴ "I was struck in my own travels to see how so many of the most confident, and by mainstream standards successful, natives I met... had spent a good chunk of their lives in integrated communities. They got beyond the walls that so many native leaders have built around their communities and reinforced with the steel of federal money." John Stackhouse, "Assimilation is not something to fear," *The Globe and Mail*, December 15, 2001, August 20, 2002, <http://www.globeandmail.com/series/apartheid/stories/20011215-5.html>.

Canada's current aboriginal policies are heavily influenced by past colonial interpretations of aboriginal people and cultures. At the time of Canada's founding, aboriginal people, their property, and all aspects of their lives, were deemed to be a federal responsibility as delineated by Section 91 (24) of the Constitution.

The Indian Act was created to consolidate administrative control over aboriginal people, their resources and property. Indian Reserves were created across the country to restrict mobility and segregate aboriginal people from the land and the newly arriving non-indigenous populations. The reserves were established as a federal jurisdiction. The federal government, or their designated agents, provided on-reserve services.

In 1951, Indian Act restrictions on mobility were removed and aboriginal people were allowed to move off federal reserves into provincial space in search of greater economic, education and social opportunities. But the constitutional provisions keeping aboriginal people and their lands in federal ward-ship have not been updated. As a result, aboriginal people off-reserve have found themselves in the peculiar situation of being federal subjects within provincial domains. Fifty years ago, when few aboriginal people lived off-reserve, this was a jurisdictional curiosity. But what began as a jurisdictional curiosity now causes real and immediate problems. Aboriginal people, by virtue of being a federal responsibility, are unable to easily access many of the provincially provided social programs that other Canadians take for granted.

Aboriginal people off-reserve are clearly a federal responsibility but how should the federal government exercise its responsibilities to native people living extra-jurisdictionally in provincial space? How would this practically be accomplished? Faced with challenging constitutional and legal issues about federal incursions into provincial space, federal policy makers have chosen to largely ignore the issue and remain focused on the jurisdictionally neater federal reserves.

Provincial governments, not willing to encroach on a federal responsibility, offer aboriginal people limited and uneven social services. Cities and municipalities, as creations of the provincial government and in many cases limited in financial resources, are equally hesitant to assume an abandoned federal responsibility.

Aboriginal people thus find themselves trapped between federal and provincial practices that effectively limit them from the full benefits of the Canadian social net. Adding to their conundrum, by virtue of being off-reserve in provincial space, urban aboriginal people have limited ways of making their conditions known to federal policy makers. There are few, if any, effective urban political organizations that represent city-based aboriginal interests.

FEDERAL POLICY APPLICATION - THE SITUATION

Where the federal government has taken an interest in a specific urban aboriginal area, it is usually in a limited capacity and almost always in conjunction with an existing provincial, municipal or First Nation government partner. The result is usually a conflicting labyrinth of overlapping and sometimes contradictory service offerings. A recent Canada West Foundation project found that government services directed towards urban aboriginal clients differed from region to region.¹⁵ The result is that social service offerings are often confusing, erratic and difficult to navigate.

¹⁵ Calvin Hanselmann, "Urban Aboriginal People in Western Canada: Realities and Policies," September 2001, August 20, 2002, <http://www.aboriginal-edmonton.com/PDF/CanWestUrbanRpt.pdf>.

Some municipalities have tried to fill in for an absent federal government, but their resources and capacities to deal with a highly mobile and transient population tax their limited resources. There are examples of municipal-aboriginal partnerships that provide services to aboriginal groups, but the majority of these agreements are with established First Nations groups that have existing reserve bases within city boundaries.

Pan-aboriginal social agencies, such as the Aboriginal Friendship Centers, offer some services to urban aboriginal populations, but funding for the Centers is often from multiple government funding sources and subject to annual review and cuts. Also, the Centers, when acting as social agencies, are not politically accountable to their urban aboriginal residents.

While all of these initiatives are admirable, they are each a poor substitute for a coherent on and off reserve federal policy. That said, it is not realistic to expect a major change in federal - provincial constitutional jurisdictions. Instead, what is needed is a new practical approach on getting around the constitutional limitations imposed on a modern and mobile aboriginal population.

Aboriginal public policy needs not only to take into account diverse geography, history, cultures and rights issues of aboriginal peoples in different parts of the country, but it must also embrace a growing modernity that comes part and parcel with urbanity and mobility. Creative insight on how to approach the social, education and development challenges that confound policy makers might be found in the cities.

NEW REALITIES

In the move towards urbanity, city-dwelling aboriginal people have been forced to confront and, sometimes tragically, answer difficult questions about what it means to share Canada. This knowledge is re-making what it means to be aboriginal in an increasingly urban and global world. Some aboriginal leaders have heralded this increased urbanity as a loss of culture and birthright. Certainly the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reinforced this idea of geographic determinism, but there is another way in which to view this definitive migration.

I would like to posit that the on and off reserve components are not separate entities but are in fact, inexorably linked forming a communal moiety. All First Nations in Canada are now essentially bi-furcated communities with one part living on-reserve in the traditional territory, and the other living in urban centers. In urban environments, First Nation members from many different reserves interrelate with other aboriginal peoples to become an amorphous, loosely-affiliated meta-community that bears a striking resemblance to overseas expatriate communities.

When policy makers broaden their view from a Canada-centric perspective to an international vantage, they will notice a remarkable correlation between off-reserve aboriginal populations and international émigré communities that exist apart from their homeland countries.¹⁶ Global expatriate communities, similar to aboriginal urban populations, are not astray portions of their originating nations, but are increasingly important extensions of their homeland-based cultures.

¹⁶ “There is a valuable lesson to be learned here from overseas development, where the best intentions for democracy and accountability have gone astray at times simply because they were imposed from the outside.” John Stackhouse, "Overhauling the reserve system," *The Globe and Mail*, Dec. 15, 2001, August 20, 2002, <http://www.globeandmail.com/series/apartheid/stories/20011215-2.html>.

These foreign individuals, like aboriginal people in Canada, have chosen to migrate in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families. Distant from their home nations and effectively residing extra-jurisdictionally in politically indifferent cities, expatriates adapt what is locally available and create self-reliant networks to meet their particular needs. The opportunities in including these migrant networks in home community development is staggering.

Thanks to increased mobility and lower telecommunication and travel costs, émigrés who would have once been lost from their home nations continue to remain involved in their homeland's cultural, economic and political life. Development-focused nations with large émigré populations have begun to see this type of expatriate flow as a valuable resource in promoting societal and material development of their home-based societies. The Inter-America Development Bank reported that Latin America and Caribbean expatriate workers -- sending relatively small individual amounts of US\$250 to friends and family eight to ten times a year -- contributed nearly US\$20 billion in 2000 to their home countries. This amount exceeded the region's Official Development Assistance and is nearly equal to one-third of the region's Foreign Direct Investment. Worldwide, expatriates contributed more than US\$100 billion in 2000 to their homeland communities. This amount is expected to increase to US\$300 billion by the year 2010.

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To encourage their extra-jurisdictional nationals to participate in the development of their home societies, many countries have initiated creative public policies that allow their expatriates to contribute not only capital but knowledge to their home societies.

Mexico encourages its foreign nationals to contribute to their home communities by offering remittance development bonds and in some regional cases, matching three-for-one every dollar expatriates contribute to small-scale infrastructure projects.¹⁸ In further recognition of the importance of expatriates, the Mexican government, working around the extra-jurisdictional issues of having its nationals out of the country, actively assists migrant associations of émigrés from the same region to form foreign expatriate community networks. There are now approximately 400 such community support organizations across the United States. Guatemala and El Salvador are now encouraging similar regional associations for their overseas nationals.¹⁹ As an odd aside, El Salvador also helps its citizens in the United States apply for political asylum so that they will continue to send money back to their families.²⁰

For the past ten years, Colombia has worked to build a knowledge network of expatriate researchers and engineers in 30 countries to contribute to nationally important joint research projects in areas such as biotech and robotics. Uruguay, recognizing the opportunity in its 400,000 increasingly educated overseas residents, has launched a similar program.²¹ The Public

¹⁷ Multilateral Investment Fund, "Remittances as a Development Tool: A Regional Conference - Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean: Comparative Statistics," May 2001, pg. 6 -7, September 15, 2002. <http://www.iadb.org/mif/eng/conferences/pdf/Comparativeremittan2.pdf>

¹⁸ Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility, "Tapping Financial Remittances for Infrastructure Development: The Case of Mexico," April 2002, August 20, 2002, [http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ppiaf/activity.nsf/files/MEXICO.pdf/\\$FILE/MEXICO.pdf](http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ppiaf/activity.nsf/files/MEXICO.pdf/$FILE/MEXICO.pdf)

¹⁹ "Making the Most of an Exodus - Emigration from Latin America," *The Economist*, February 23, 2002, August 20, 2002, www.economist.com.

²⁰ Myron Weiner, "Nations without Borders: The Gifts of Folk Gone Abroad," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1996, August 20, 2002, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19960301fareviewessay4192/myron-weiner/nations-without-borders-the-gifts-of-folk-gone-abroad.html>.

²¹ "Making the Most of an Exodus - Emigration from Latin America."

Institute of California found that intellectual two-way flows between homeland and Silicon Valley expatriate communities, particularly in the Chinese and Indian communities, has resulted in entrepreneurial and commercial practices being "exported" back home. The supposed "brain drain" of these nations' highly-educated émigrés is being replaced by a "brain circulation".²²

The United Nations (UN), has initiated the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) program to encourage qualified émigrés to return home for short three to twelve week volunteer assignments as teachers, researchers and engineers. The UN has found that TOKTEN participants transfer knowledge faster and easier than outside government officials as TOKTEN participants do not require social and cultural context adjustment. The UN also reports that in almost all TOKTEN exchanges, valuable networks are created and follow-up between the home community and volunteer takes place. Expatriate participants can register their interest on-line at a UN web site.²³

Politically, homeland politicians are also increasingly seeking the support of their émigrés communities. In recent Colombia national elections, a Miami-based Colombian won a seat in the Colombian Congress offering to represent his overseas compatriots and Mexican politicians regularly campaign and raise funds in Los Angeles, Houston and other U.S. cities.²⁴

These nations and organizations have recognized the importance of crafting public policies that include expatriates in the overall development of their home societies. In fact, such an international outlook is absolutely vital to fulfilling the global human security agenda. Applying these international examples to Canada, urban aboriginal communities are beginning to exhibit similar education, knowledge and capital flows as their transnational counterparts. Like foreign émigré communities, aboriginal people off-reserve live in politically indifferent extra-jurisdictional environments where they are forced to develop networks to get around the constitutional limitations that stymie policy makers. Thanks to telecommunications and the Internet, there are increasing multi-directional flows of ideas, concepts and experiences between aboriginal people on and off reserve.

One only needs to look at the emergence of multiple pan-First Nation media, business organizations and cultural events to see that there is a burgeoning international-like cross-fertilization of thoughts and concepts occurring among on and off-reserve aboriginal people. Modern aboriginal media networks that service both urban and rural communities such as the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society, the Aboriginal People's Television Network, First Nation-oriented radio stations, and aboriginal newspapers such as Aboriginal Times, Raven's Eye or First Perspective, are all direct outgrowths of an increasing urbanity. Aboriginal business organizations and trade shows such as the Native Investment and Trade Association's NEXUS conference direct investors and capital to aboriginal entrepreneurs on and off reserve, and cultural events like the Toronto International Pow-Wow and the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards are part of the growing non-geographic characterization of what it means to be modernly

²² Public Policy Institute of California, "Silicon Valley's Skilled Immigrants Becoming Agents of Global Economic Change, Survey Finds Hi Tech Immigrants Fueling Entrepreneurial Networks in Home Countries," April 19, 2002, August 20, 2002,

<http://www.ppic.org/publications/PPIC159/ppic159.press.html>

²³ United Nations, "What is TOKTEN?," UNOPS, August 20, 2002,

<http://www.unops.org/textimageflash/default.asp?pmode=3&pno=122>

²⁴ Moisés Naim, "The New Diaspora," *Foreign Policy*, July-August 2002, September 15, 2002,

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issue_julyaug_2002/missing_links.html.

aboriginal.

Aboriginal youth in cities cross paths with indigenous youth from other First Nations and increasingly, other countries. Increasing numbers of aboriginal university students traveling to cities for education are exposed to new ideas and skills at urban institutions and work places and aboriginal wage earners returning to reserves for visits contribute gifts and financial remittances to friends and family. And Indian band election campaigns are increasingly being projected via the Internet to band members in cities far removed from their traditional territory.

This on and off reserve flow of people, ideas and goods between urban and rural communities is rapidly effecting a re-definition of what it means to be aboriginal in a modern Canada. Yet the possibilities and potential of multi-directional flows of ideas, education, and capital between on and off reserve communities is outside the purview of federal policy makers because the federal government limits its view of aboriginality to only the one-half of aboriginal communities, the part that easily fits its needs.

Federal policy makers often continue to see aboriginality in terms of a historic ‘top down’ line structure with Ottawa supposedly directing all inputs into Canada’s Indian Reserves. Requests to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs for statistical data on the flow of people, goods and capital between on and off reserve populations are met with a perplexed silence. At present, the federal government does not collect the information that other émigré nations have realized is essential to their overall social, economic and education development. But the multi-directional, inter-communities and intra-reserve circulation of ideas, concepts and money is happening. And it is accelerating.

It seems that while Canada’s concept of plurality has evolved, and indeed, our widespread acceptance of the idea of political correctness is positively 21st century, government attitudes and policies governing aboriginal people have not moved much past 1867. If we can shift our societal lens of the on-off reserve situation to an international-level perspective of urban expatriate communities, there is great reason for optimism. This is not to say that there are not massive social problems in urban aboriginal communities. The levels of overall aboriginal poverty, homelessness, unemployment and violence are extreme and undeniable. It would be heinously remiss of governments not to continue trying to help the most needy of our society. But in the quest for improving the lives of aboriginal people, policy makers need an inclusive view that assists aboriginal people both on and off-reserve

In the quest for new aboriginal strategies, policy makers would be well advised to think “outside the constitutional box” to develop an urban-inclusive aboriginal policy that helps aboriginal people strengthen, not replace, nor replicate, the already well-developed informal skills, ideas and community networks native people have already built for themselves across the country. It would be relatively easy, not to mention constitutionally polite, for the federal government to begin a process of bolstering aboriginal peoples’ already existing multi-directional expatriate-like networks.

To move forward, Canadian aboriginal policy needs to adapt to the new network reality of what it means to be aboriginal in this country. This will require not only a re-interpretation of aboriginality, but a forward thinking multi-perspectival shift in thinking.

NEXT STEPS

Given the fact that there are expatriate-like flows of aboriginal people and ideas in Canada, policy makers would be wise to study international policy examples of how to successfully include extra-jurisdictional people in the development of their home communities.

Replicate international examples of expatriate-to-homeland connections. Bolster the already existing informal channels.

As was pointed out earlier, foreign governments have realized that they can best help international émigré communities by applying their expertise to enhance and strengthen already existing expatriate networks to make it easier for expatriates to remain connected and contribute to their homelands. They have not tried to replicate or replace the initiative of the expatriate networks.

Expatriate communities have successfully worked around the barriers that have limited their hopes, needs and aspirations. Successful transnational émigré networks are self-reliantly distributive with many points of contact.

For aboriginal people, Canada's Aboriginal Friendship Centers are an important point of urban contact. The Federal Government's fiscal involvement in the numerous Aboriginal Friendship Centers could allow policy makers to engage the Centers in a pilot project to gauge the volume of flow between selected on and off reserve communities.

Enlarge the concept of aboriginality so that it matches the geographic diversity of a modern and highly mobile aboriginal population.

The federal government's focus on historic perceptions of aboriginality blinds it to what is really going on in aboriginal Canada. The 50% of aboriginal people who have chosen to relocate to the cities have made it very clear that they don't see themselves existing within the neat administrative categories that are so very important to federal policy makers. The legal definitions of on or off-reserve have become hollow honorifics with little relevance to a modern, evolving and mobile aboriginal population.

There are very real constitutional restrictions on federal involvement in service delivery to urban expatriate aboriginal populations, but this box-like mentality of on or off reserve limits the government's ability to encourage the burgeoning intellectual, development and capital flows that exist between urban and reserve-based aboriginal communities. By using the constitution as a way to avoid considering unique ways to enable aboriginal people to contribute to their own development does all Canadians a disservice. There are no constitutional limits on creative thought.

Look globally for comparative examples.

Canada is not alone in having large numbers of disadvantaged populations relocating to urban centers. By broadening the perspective from a domestic focus to an international viewpoint, policy makers might see the on-off reserve situation in a very different light. By applying creative thought and looking outside our domestic perceptions, policy makers can expand their range of possible policy options.²⁵

²⁵ The Trans-Communities Program at <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk> provides numerous examples of successful transnational labour, business and commodity markets, political movements and cultural

Collect data on the on-off reserve interaction.

The federal government's current on-reserve focus means that it does not maintain the essential intra-aboriginal community statistical data required to understand how urban expatriates interrelate among themselves and with their corresponding on-reserve components. The federally supported Canada Foundation for Innovation is currently funding a University of Saskatchewan Urban Aboriginal Database, which according to the university website, will start to document the location, dynamics, characteristics and change over time of Aboriginal people in urban centres.²⁶ The information being collected by the University is a good initial step to understanding the integrated nature of on and off reserve populations. Without full data on the nature of the interrelations between all aboriginal people, it will be impossible for policy makers to fully understand how to support aboriginal expatriate contributions to their home communities.

Create a politically neutral space for aboriginal people living in urban areas to speak.

Because the current aboriginal system is geared to a decidedly on-reserve perspective, off-reserve urban aboriginal people have few, if any, means to effectively communicate their views to policy makers. There is a great need for a politically neutral space for city-dwelling aboriginal people to convey their thoughts, experience and knowledge to the policy discourse. If a space can be created for urban aboriginal people to speak and be heard, not one but many voices will emerge from urban centers across Canada.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to inject a broader international perspective into what is occurring across all of Canada's aboriginal communities. Some of the concepts presented in this paper may be controversial. The aboriginal realm in Canada is a highly political, value laden and as such, emotionally charged environment. "To be aboriginal in this country is to be political. It has always been this way."²⁷ People, political parties and aboriginal organizations all listen and engage concepts from their particular political perspective. Government departments, aboriginal NGOs, academics and politicians have built careers based on the current nature of the federal aboriginal relationship. The idea of bolstering the non-attributable and distributive nature of Canada's existing aboriginal networks could be seen as a detriment to indigenous and political entities that depend on a centralized control of information.

This paper does not evade the fact that overall, aboriginal populations have desperate social and economic problems. The condition of aboriginal people in Canada is indefensible and inexcusable. Nor does this paper advocate that there is an emerging middle or elite aboriginal class that will save aboriginal Canada and soothe the conscious of non-aboriginal Canada, nor that successful aboriginal people should leave the cities and permanently return home to rebuild their government-delineated reserve communities.

Reframing the urban aboriginal question from a constitutionally restrictive on or off-reserve

community networks.

²⁶ University of Saskatchewan, "U of S News: \$50,000 Awarded for Urban Aboriginal Database," Nov. 19, 2001, August 20, 2002, <http://www.usask.ca/events/news/articles/20011129-2.html>.

²⁷ Mark Podlasly, "Are Aboriginal People Canadian?: An examination of what it means to be Canadian in a shared land," *Literary Review of Canada*, Nov./Dec. 2001, p. 22-23.

problem to a wider, more expansive global view increases the range of possibilities policy makers might explore for improving the lives of aboriginal people wherever they live.

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