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Urban Aboriginal Governance in Canada: Paradigms and Prospects

Zusammenfassung

Fast die Hälfte der indigenen Bevölkerung Kanadas lebt in städtischen Regionen, unter sozio-ökonomischen Bedingungen, die wesentlich schlechter sind als die der übrigen Bevölkerung. Die Royal Commission on Aboriginal People hat in ihrem Abschlußbericht neue Wege und Möglichkeiten zur Berücksichtigung indigener Interessen und Anliegen auf kommunaler Ebene aufgezeigt. Die von der Kommission ausgesprochenen Empfehlungen können die Grundlage für künftige einvernehmliche Lösungen der bestehenden Probleme bilden. Drei Möglichkeiten zur Einbeziehung indigener Interessenvertretung auf kommunaler Ebene wurden auf ihre jeweiligen Vorteile hin untersucht, die Ergebnisse können als Richtlinien für künftige Entscheidungsprozesse dienen: direkte Selbstverwaltung, Beteiligung an Organisationsprozessen und die Reform des kanadischen Gemeindefwesens. Ob die gegenwärtig bestehende Chance zur Veränderung genutzt werden kann, wird wesentlich von zwei Faktoren abhängig sein: der Beziehung der Bundesregierung zu den Provinzregierungen und der Fähigkeit der Ureinwohner und ihrer Organisationen, sich auf lokaler, Provinz- und Bundesebene Gehör zu verschaffen.

Résumé

Cet article traite de l'histoire de la politique officielle et du gouvernement des peuples autochtones urbains au Canada. Ce sujet est très important parce que les conditions socioéconomiques des peuples autochtones dans les villes du Canada sont très difficiles. Le fait que la moitié de la population autochtone habite dans les centres urbains rend plus important le défi de les gouverner. L'article montre que le moment est venu de faire des progrès dans ce domaine. La Commission royale sur les peuples autochtones nous a donné un modèle de consensus. Les avis spécifiques rendus par la Commission sur l'efficacité de trois modèles spécifiques pour gouvernement les peuples autochtones urbains – l'administration autochtone, la gestion conjointe et la réforme des institutions municipales – nous a donné un guide pour les essentiels de la réforme. En conclusion, cet article aborde deux éléments qui auront beaucoup d'influence sur le progrès. Ce sont les relations intergouvernementales entre le gouvernement fédéral et les gouvernements provinciaux et la capacité des peuples autochtones urbains d'attirer l'attention aux niveaux local, provincial et fédéral.

Introduction

Almost fifty percent of Aboriginal people in Canada live in an urban setting, either as permanent residents or as periodic urban dwellers. Over the years, a significant network of urban services and institutions for Aboriginal people has developed, sometimes as part of the quest for self-sufficiency by Aboriginal people themselves, sometimes as a result of the perception of need by governments or the voluntary sector. Nonetheless, there are major outstanding issues related to governance and Canada's urban Aboriginal population. These include the challenges of: responding to the legitimately diverse perspectives which Aboriginal people have about their needs in the urban context and appropriate forms of governance to respond to those needs; sorting out the funding jungle for urban Aboriginal initiatives. This includes addressing requirements for adequate and stable funding for urban services and institutions ; and building constructive relations between Canadian local governments and the urban Aboriginal population.

This paper will argue that Canada is now at a moment of opportunity with respect to urban Aboriginal governance. The work of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) provides a model of how to reach consensus on urban issues and displays some approaches to Aboriginal urban governance for public consideration. Furthermore, the Government of Canada and local governments are themselves becoming more aware of the need to deal with urban Aboriginal governance issues in a concerted and constructive manner. Not surprisingly, there are also a number of factors which will shape the extent to which this moment of opportunity will actually be seized. These include: the federal-provincial dynamic – both in general terms and as it relates to Aboriginal issues – and the capacity of urban Aboriginal people and their organizations to have their voices heard, at the local, provincial and national levels.

This paper will elaborate on why this is a moment of opportunity and ponder the factors which will shape its realization. The paper begins with a brief overview of the demographic and policy context for thinking about urban Aboriginal governance in Canada. It then discusses the two major levers for improving the situation – the work and recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the examples of flexible experimentation related to urban Aboriginal governance, which are beginning to emerge. The paper concludes with a prognosis for the future. The Government of Canada's very recent formal response to the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples influences this prognosis.

Before proceeding, the use of the term "governance" should be clarified. It is used here in an inclusive sense to refer to the institutions, services and political arrangements dedicated to meeting and representing the needs and interests of the urban Aboriginal population. Thus it refers to urban service institutions, such as health care or education institutions, and advocacy organizations, which represent urban Aboriginal people in dealing with issues among themselves or in the broader urban context. In the urban context, Aboriginal service and advocacy organizations are frequently one and the same. The term "governance" is also meant to include special arrangements undertaken by public governments (local, provincial/territorial or federal) to modify service delivery or provide political access for

Aboriginal people living in the urban context. It should be noted that the governance paradigm is increasingly in use in Canada, as governments of all types are seeking new approaches to dealing with policy development and service delivery. This is occurring partly as a result of fiscal pressures and partly as a result of realization that an increasingly complex Canadian society requires new relationships between governments and civil society (Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1997).

The Demographic and Policy Context

There is an historic connection between Aboriginal people and urbanization in Canada. In some cases, major cities have grown contiguous to or on top of Aboriginal settlements or places of special importance. Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver are just three examples. In each case, strategic location and developing trade patterns influenced the Aboriginal-European/Canadian convergence. Thinking more generally, Canada's largest cities and its smaller urban centres have come to be viewed as magnets, attracting significant numbers of Aboriginal people from Indian reserves and, in the case of Inuit and Métis, from rural and remote areas.

Descriptions of this phenomenon are often couched in terms of "push" and "pull" factors. Aboriginal people are thought to be pushed from their home communities by the low standard of living, unavailability of adequate housing and, in some cases, an oppressive pathology of substance and sexual abuse. The latter condition may contribute to the fact that women have been over-represented within the urban Aboriginal population for some time. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, p.607. Until 1985, when legislation (Bill C 31) was passed restoring status to Indian women who married men without Indian status, inter-marriage and the resulting loss of claim to on-reserve housing and other *Indian Act* rights and services was also an important push factor.

In many respects, the "pull" factors to the city are remedial in nature. There is, perhaps, the prospect of better or less crowded housing, although Statistics Canada's major special survey of Aboriginal peoples, the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, found that almost twice as many urban Aboriginal households were experiencing core housing need than non-Aboriginal households (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 609). There is also the need to access services, such as education and health care, which may be more readily available in the urban context. The city pulls Aboriginal people with its prospect of employment. Aboriginal people in urban areas experience significantly higher rates of unemployment than the general population. Nonetheless, in terms of pure wage employment, urban prospects are better than in rural or remote communities. Finally, there is a practice of urban visiting. Periods of residence in the city, to be with other family members or friends or to engage in various rites of passage are a part of Aboriginal life in Canada, just as they are among the rest of the country's non-urban population. To conclude this overview, mention must be made of the fact that there is a significant portion of Canada's Aboriginal population who have lived in the urban environment for a long time – generations in some cases. In-

cluded in this group are members of Indian bands who have reserves in cities; but there are others, as well.

A composite of the urban Aboriginal population in Canada emerges from the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, based on the 1991 APS. It can be summarized as follows:

- as of 1991, approximately 320,00 (44.4 per cent) of the total Aboriginal population lived in urban areas;
- among the four main Aboriginal groupings, non-status Indians were most heavily urbanized (69 per cent) as a proportion of their total population. For other groups the proportion was: Métis 65 per cent; registered Indians 34 per cent; and Inuit 22 per cent;
- women are over-represented among the urban Aboriginal population for all groups except Inuit. They are frequently the head of urban Aboriginal families;
- Aboriginal people residing in urban areas are considerably younger than the general population;
- the urban Aboriginal population is generally less well educated and experiences higher unemployment rates and lower income levels than the non-Aboriginal population. This contributes to and reinforces the very high incidence of poverty and social difficulty among urban Aboriginal residents (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, pp. 605-612. See also Peters, 1996, pp. 306-314).

Thinking about the future, the Royal Commission has projected a slight decrease in the relative share of the total Aboriginal population residing in cities by 2016. This is accompanied, however, by an actual increase in the urban Aboriginal population of 43 per cent. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 603. However, another examination of the demography, focusing specifically on Indian First Nations, has suggested that if the advent of self government leads to difficulties and uncertainties on reserves, there may be a more pronounced flight from reserves to urban centres in the future (Four Directions Consulting Group, 1997). Until recently, the situation of urban Aboriginal people in Canada has been largely ignored or sidestepped by public policy makers. To a considerable degree, this has stemmed from the fact that the federal government has interpreted its constitutional responsibility "for Indians and lands reserved for Indians" (Section 91[24] of the *Constitution Act*) in a restrictive manner. For example, status Indians are subject to the terms of the *Indian Act*, which confers access to federally funded services and other rights-based benefits, only if they reside on reserve. The federal government takes the position that any exceptions to this limitation (The most prominent are the extension of federal payments for non-insured health benefits and access to funding for post-secondary education to status Indians residing off reserve.) reflect public policy, not recognition of any inherent Aboriginal rights. As a result of a court decision in the 1950s, Inuit have been considered to have similar eligibility for federal funding to Indians, although they are not constituted into bands for governing or administrative purposes. Métis people, on the other hand, have been excluded from eligibility for federal funding and related services.

Provincial and local governments have responded to this situation in varying ways. Provinces provide education, health, social services to urban Aboriginal

residents on the same basis as the general population. Among the provinces, there is considerable variation in commitment to tailoring programming and service access for Aboriginal people. Local governments show further variation. Until recently, the conventional wisdom was for local governments in cities with a large Aboriginal population to think of this situation as requiring more control and containment than recognition and remedial action. Accordingly, many urban Aboriginal residents possibly think of themselves as being under an urban *authority* (primarily defined by their encounters with police and the municipal inspectorate) rather than as being served by an urban *government*. There are exceptions, however. For example, the City of Calgary has had a Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, consisting of members of council and representatives of the local Aboriginal population, for several years. There are also examples of common service agreements between Indian bands with reserves in urban areas and their municipal counterparts. Some of these have been longstanding. However, to quote a recent review of municipal-Aboriginal relations, "A review of the literature and effective (best) practices in municipal-Aboriginal relations reveals little direct discussion of the topic." (Hughes, 1997, np).

It is worthwhile to consider whether academic and other commentary on the situation of urban Aboriginal people has mirrored the policy neglect. Canada has a fairly vital tradition of exchange between academe and public policy makers. In this case, however, we find sporadic academic interest and commentary. Perhaps the most seminal research document in the urban Aboriginal context, as well as more generally, is the 1966 *Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada* (commonly known as the Hawthorn Report). It projected a relatively positive view of the potential of urbanization as a phenomenon which would increase employment among Canada's Indians and decrease what were seen as destructive social relations in reserve communities. The contrary reality of the urban experience became the subject of some commentary from the late 1970s until the early 1980s (Stanbury, 1975; Krotz, 1980) but, as others have observed, (Peters, 1996) urban Aboriginal issues moved off the screen from the mid 1980s until the establishment of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1992. It can be argued that the question of urban Aboriginal governance was never explicitly on the policy or research agenda until the Royal Commission began its work.

In contrast, urban Aboriginal people in Canada were "living" urban governance issues during the same time period. To a considerable degree, this stemmed from the need for self-help – for services and coping mechanisms in the urban context. A frequently used approach to coalescing urban Aboriginal interests and responding to need has been through establishment of an Aboriginal friendship centre. The history of Aboriginal action in Canada's largest city, Toronto, provides a useful illustration of how the friendship centre has become an important foundation for urban Aboriginal governance in Canada.

The Native Canadian Centre of Toronto was established in 1962. Its progenitor was the Toronto Indian Club, a YMCA-centred social group, established in 1950 when the estimated Aboriginal population was between two and three hundred people (Obonsawin-Irwin Consulting Inc., 1993, p. 17). By 1991, the APS pegged the Aboriginal population in Toronto at 14, 205 (Peters, 1996, p. 313). By that same

year, the Native Canadian Centre had played a significant catalytic role in the establishment of twenty-four additional Aboriginal institutions in Toronto. These were working in diverse areas such as the Arts, health care, housing, social services and employment training (Obonsawin-Irwin Consulting Inc, 1993, p. 22). This pattern was replicated in other major urban centres with significant Aboriginal populations. For example, the city of Regina had approximately 25 Aboriginal agencies and the city of Winnipeg had about 55 Aboriginal service organizations, according to an inventory undertaken by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 555).

Since the 1960s, Native friendship centres have been established in many other Canadian cities and towns and a national political network, based on the urban friendship centre movement, has developed. By 1997, the National Association of Native Friendship Centres (NAFC) represented 114 such organizations across Canada. This association had succeeded in obtaining core funding from the federal government. The survival of individual centres, however, remained precarious as core funding has been decreased since 1993 and the scramble for project funds has become more competitive. This situation has contributed to the National Association becoming more vigorous in its advocacy role, arguing that it is the representative voice of urban Aboriginal people. In its view, the national Aboriginal political organizations (the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, Métis National Council and Native Women's Association of Canada) "have yet to demonstrate the ability to service their urban Aboriginal populations." In the NAFC's eyes, this situation has been paralleled by the lack of political representation of urban needs and interests at the national level. Its conclusion: "The NAFC is ideally placed to assume the mantle of political leadership for a large portion of the urban Aboriginal constituency." (National Association of Friendship Centres, 1997, p. 2).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Harbinger of Urban Opportunity

The work of Canada's major Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples represents a major breakthrough in dealing with urban Aboriginal governance issues. Its contribution lies in its specific recommendations concerning urban governance and in the path it followed to develop those recommendations.

The Government of Canada established the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in August 1991. In part, RCAP was a response to a series of specific incidents, one of the most important of which, "the Oka Crisis," had resulted in violence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the city of Montreal. The Commission's 16 point Terms of Reference, developed by a highly respected retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, were extensive and intended to probe the fundamentals of Aboriginal life and Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. The core mandate of the Commission's urban work is found in its sixth Term of Reference, that it examine "The constitutional and legal position of Métis and off-reserve Indians." This was amplified by other aspects of the Commission's charge related to self-government, culture, education, economic develop-

ment, and so on (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 1, pp. 699-702).

The Commission itself consisted of seven individuals, four of whom were Aboriginal. It had co-chairs and co-directors of research, consisting of one prominent Aboriginal person and one prominent non-Aboriginal person in each case. The Commission retained a well known Indian urban activist and a non-Aboriginal individual, who had experience as both a city councillor in the City of Regina and as a senior staff member of a prominent Métis institution, to share the position of urban research coordinator.

RCAP's research, policy deliberations and recommendations on urban issues were quite diverse. They focused on: cultural identity in the urban context, racism, the phenomenon and demographics of Aboriginal urbanization, as well as on governance issues (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, pp. 519-621). Arguably, however, some of its most important work centred on urban governance.¹

The Commission's decision to establish an Urban Governance Working Group was particularly innovative. This group consisted of nine Aboriginal individuals who had been active in urban affairs in different parts of the country and the chief administrative officers of three Canadian cities – Toronto, Winnipeg and Fredericton. Despite the fact that both Winnipeg and Toronto have large Aboriginal populations, in neither case had its chief administrative officer been heavily involved in Aboriginal matters. The chief administrative officer of the City of Fredericton had somewhat more familiarity as his city had a longstanding contractual relationship with an Indian band whose reserve was within the city limits.

The group held six two-day meetings over a one year period. Its goal was to develop a common vision concerning urban Aboriginal governance and approaches to realizing that vision. The discussions were often intense, revealing fundamentally different perspectives. They were also, however, accompanied by a desire for understanding and a spirit of respect. Everyone stayed at the table and, in the end, a remarkable consensus was achieved. The approaches to urban Aboriginal governance, which the entire working group was prepared to endorse, went significantly beyond what an observer at the group's first meeting would have anticipated. In part, this was because the group came to the realization that improving the circumstances of Aboriginal people in Canadian urban centres was inextricably tied to the prosperity and civility of those cities and towns themselves. Agreement on this fundamental point provided a significant bridge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the group and enabled development of a broad urban governance agenda.

Specifically, the Urban Aboriginal Working Group conceived of three possible approaches to improving governance for Aboriginal people in the urban context. The first was outright self government. The group supported the establishment of self governing Aboriginal institutions in urban areas to be responsible for key services, such as education, health care, housing and so on. Some such institutions exist but their current dependency on short term conditional funding from the federal or provincial governments renders their existence precarious and reduces their capacity to be fully accountable to Aboriginal people.

The second approach endorsed by the working group was co-management. In this model, an Aboriginal authority would enter into an agreement with public government – local, provincial and/or federal – to take responsibility for the essential aspects of Aboriginal culture which need to be reflected in the delivery of a particular service or in the accomplishment of other aspects of urban governance, such as planning. Co-management agreements would be embedded in enabling legislation and negotiated agreements. They were seen to be both long term and evolutionary. The group envisioned co-management models emerging, initially, for the provision of "higher order" services in fields such as education (post secondary) and health care (acute care). The co-management approach was also seen as responding to the need for some economies of scale in urban centres with populations (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) too small to justify separate arrangements.

The third approach was to reform municipal governments and other local public authorities to make them more representative of Aboriginal residents. The working group advocated guaranteed Aboriginal representation on public authorities dealing with issues of particular interest or concern to Aboriginal people. Examples cited include: police boards, public health boards, housing authorities and hospital boards. The group also advocated more widespread establishment of Aboriginal urban affairs committees of local councils, replicating the City of Calgary example. The reform of public institutions was seen as an important first step. However, the working group achieved consensus that the two other approaches, co-management and self government, were the necessary foundations for fully achieving urban prosperity and civility (Graham et al., 1994).

The Urban Governance Working Group's conclusions and recommendations were duly considered by the Royal Commission itself and have emerged for public view in the Commission's *Report*. Naturally, they deserve further scrutiny and refinement. This work does, however, comprise the most concerted effort to think through the *problematique* of urban Aboriginal governance ever undertaken in Canada.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples had a broader catalytic effect in generating thought about urban Aboriginal issues, however. Its consultation program, involving the public and institutional intervenors, prompted Canadian municipalities to become involved through their national organization, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). The deliberations surrounding preparation of the FCM's brief to the Commission (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 1993) were seminal to the development of a new institution, the Centre for Aboriginal-Municipal Relations. The federal government's support for this centre and other recent government initiatives suggest that the tectonic plates of Canadian inter-governmental relations may be shifting, with salutary effect, in the urban Aboriginal context.

Recent Urban Aboriginal Initiatives by Canadian Governments

In the intervening period between the Oka Crisis and the establishment of RCAP, there have been developments on the urban front. Some of these have been at the local level, some have involved provincially-based initiatives and some have reflected signs of a changing federal stance, even prior to its formal response to the *RAP Report*.

In early 1997, the Government of Canada began to take a somewhat stronger interest in urban Aboriginal matters. This was justified on the grounds that such a move constituted good public policy. This justification is important for three reasons. First, Aboriginal affairs has been the only area of federal expenditure which has not decreased, in the context of the significant fiscal restraint exercised by the Government of Canada since 1993.² The question of whether continuing the existing regime of programs and expenditures on Aboriginal affairs was achieving salutary results, in terms of improving the circumstances of Aboriginal people and making them less dependent on government, rose to the surface in this context. The "good public policy" justification is also important because it indicates that the federal government wished, at least at this stage, to avoid the impression that it is willing to consider rights-based arguments for Aboriginal people other than status Indians living on-reserve and Inuit. Finally, the federal government is sensitive to the jurisdictional perils of urban initiatives, as the major areas of need fall under the constitutional jurisdiction of provincial governments. In this context, it must look for willing provincial partners in order to proceed.

In its early days, the leading edge of the federal urban strategy is found in the Prairie province of Manitoba. As of 1991, sixteen per cent of the population with Aboriginal identity lived there (Norris, 1996, p. 192). All four major Aboriginal groups have historical roots in Manitoba and it is generally considered to be the cradle of the Métis Nation. Its largest city, Winnipeg, has a large and visible Aboriginal population. As of 1991, 5.4 per cent of the city's population identified as Aboriginal; in real terms the number of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg was 44,970 (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 607). A significant number of these people are concentrated in the city's core and in its north end. The conditions for Aboriginal people living in these areas are often very difficult, a situation which elicits both despair and innovation (Stewart, 1993; Couture and Fielding, 1998, forthcoming).

The manifestations of the strategy in Winnipeg have the potential to bring about change on two very different levels. At the practical level, Winnipeg is the site of the first "single window" for service access by Aboriginal people. Closure of an historic railway station in the heart of the city provided an opportunity to establish a major cultural and service centre for Aboriginal people in the city of Winnipeg (Helgason, 1995). The federal government has collaborated with the Aboriginal Centre, the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, the Government of Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg to locate storefront operations for relevant departments from all three levels of government in the Centre. The initiative is intended to improve coordination among government services, increase sensitivity to Aboriginal peo-

ple's needs and interests and foster innovation (Human Resources Development Canada, 1997).

Moving more to the ephemeral end of the governance spectrum, the Government of Canada is about to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Manitoba and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg to begin an Aboriginal self-government initiative in the city. The practical shape of this initiative will take time to develop but indications are that the Government of Canada is willing to consider models of urban self government based on recognition of historic Aboriginal nations, as well as those which are based on a more broadly defined Aboriginal constituency. This is consistent with the approach taken by the Royal Commission although it recommended that the fundamentals of the relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and Canada rest on renewal of Aboriginal nations (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a).

A third initiative in which the federal government has been involved is the establishment of the Centre for Municipal-Aboriginal Relations, referred to above. The Centre's mandate is "to promote effective relations between municipal and First Nation Governments, and their respective communities." It is to do so by: doing research on and providing a clearinghouse for the exchange of information about innovative approaches; organizing workshops on issues of mutual concern; and facilitating pilot projects (Centre for Municipal-Aboriginal Relations, n.d.). The federal government has provided seed money to establish the Centre, which opened its doors in January 1997. Control of the Centre's affairs is, however, in the hands of a joint board of management, with representation from the national Indian Taxation Advisory Board and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Onus to build the capacity of the Centre and sustain it financially will also fall on these two parties.

Although here again it is early days, the Centre has begun to illuminate innovative practices in Aboriginal-municipal relations in Canada. These include: First Nation-municipal government economic development partnerships in the city of Saskatoon and in Kitimat British Columbia; "good neighbour agreements" between First Nations communities and their adjacent municipalities to promote mutual responsibility on environmental matters; and participation by representatives of First Nations governments in regional governance in the Greater Vancouver Area (Richardson, 1996; Froot and Bennett, 1997; Hughes, 1997).

Prognosis for the Future

Much of the above suggests grounds for optimism about recognition of the needs and interests of urban Aboriginal people through new governance paradigms and practices. In recent times, we see evidence of constructive processes, new approaches and some real achievements. Some daunting challenges remain, however.

Friendship centres and other organizations serving urban Aboriginal people remain on shaky financial ground. Generally, their long term financial prospects are unclear. The Centre for Municipal-Aboriginal Relations also faces an uncertain future.

Canadian cities themselves are under increasing stress, as financial and program cutbacks by the federal and provincial governments trickle down to create a harsher street scape for more and more city dwellers, whether they are Aboriginal or not. Also, the commitment of some municipal politicians to addressing the situation of Aboriginal residents is as variable as the wind. To this point, making the link between the *problems* experienced by many Aboriginal people living in the urban context and governance would be an intellectual stretch for many municipal councils. In the most extreme cases, Aboriginal residents are themselves characterized as "the problem."

In many respects, provincial governments currently hold the pivotal role in determining the future of urban Aboriginal governance initiatives. Municipal governments in Canada are frequently referred to as "creatures of the province," alluding to the fact that the *Constitution Act* places them under a high degree of provincial control. Thus, any federal interests in the urban Aboriginal situation must be mediated with provincial governments and some are more interested than others. The stance of any province has complex roots, including: its history and current role in the high politics of Canadian federal-provincial relations; the ideological bent of the government of the day and the basis of its electoral support; the extent to which urban Aboriginal issues are seen as pressing; and the financial obligation associated with seizing the initiative, especially at a time when provinces are attempting to contain expenditures, partly as a result of pressures caused by declining federal transfers.

On January 7, 1998, the Government of Canada issued its formal response to the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Government of Canada, 1998). From the standpoint of urban Aboriginal people, the response had a number of potentially significant elements. First, in the overarching *Statement of Renewal* of the relationship between the Government of Canada and Aboriginal Peoples, the Government indicates that many of its initiatives for renewal will apply to all Aboriginal people, without regard to their status or where they live. It also commits to specific initiatives for urban Aboriginal people.³ At this stage, however, they are defined quite broadly. For example, there is a statement about the need to respond to the serious socio-economic conditions that many urban Aboriginal People face. The federal government proposes to deal with this crisis through partnerships with provincial and municipal governments, as well as with Aboriginal organizations – leaving most of the specifics, including information about the federal financial commitment, to the future. In the absence of a specific major commitment to urban issues, the heads of both the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and the Native Women's Association of Canada quickly criticized the federal government.⁴

Reflection on the current federal stance with respect to urban Aboriginal issues generally and urban Aboriginal governance issues more specifically, suggests that more tangible signs of federal commitment and action will be crucial. A need to break barriers to fundamental and constructive change also remains. Alternatively, a "business as usual" response, reflecting a mind set that the formalities of responding to RCAP are out of the way, could escalate deterioration in Aboriginal peoples' relations with the rest of Canada and in the circumstances of Aboriginal people themselves. This pathology would be most evident in Canada's cities and towns.

Notes

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- 1 I admit to a certain bias, as I was coordinator of the Urban Governance Working Group and author of its report. I also served for a time as policy advisor to the Commission on urban governance matters, before I shifted to become policy advisor on the broad issue of governance.
- 2 It should be noted that there have been shifts in expenditure within the Aboriginal affairs envelope and there have been some program cutbacks. But demographically driven demand, as well as policy decisions have prevented cuts to the total level of federal expenditure in this area. In fact, there has been a modest increase.
- 3 This Statement of Renewal was not without controversy. The Royal Commission had proposed a new Royal Proclamation on Aboriginal-Canada relations to launch the next era. This statement was more modest and observers took particular note of the fact that it was delivered by the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, rather than the Prime Minister.
- 4 These rebukes occurred at the ceremony presenting the *Statement of Renewal*, causing some disquiet for the Ministers involved and embarrassment for the government.

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