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Rethinking the Reserve

RETHINKING THE RESERVE

ABORIGINALS IN CANADA: FIVE-WEEK SERIES

Ottawa spends almost \$9-billion annually on aboriginals - yet, rates of poverty, unemployment, addiction and illness are many times that of non-natives. Our five week series proposes innovative solutions to problems that Canada's reserve communities have faced for 200 years. It's time for fresh approaches.

'Real warriors hold jobs'

Kevin Libin, National Post
Published: Sunday, January 20, 2008



Jeff Bassett for National Post

Chief Clarence Louie of the Osoyoos Indian Band in Osoyoos B.C.

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From property taxes to private schools, condos to casinos: How a new generation of aboriginal people is trading reliance on government for a return to self-sufficiency. With this, the National Post begins a five-week series examining some surprising solutions to the challenges that have plagued the reserve system.

Whatever we agree, or don't, about the history of Canadian aboriginals, or about their current station, and what they do or don't need, are or aren't entitled to, we can all surely concede one fact: For thousands of years, Indians in North America -- or, if you prefer, Turtle Island -- somehow managed to get by. How well? That, like everything else, is up for interpretation.

But we do know this: They survived. Even flourished. They built homes. They created forms of governance and social organization. They provided their own food -- enough to allow, despite almost certain scarcity at times, their numbers to grow from a small band of northeast Asians who wandered here something like 10,000 years ago to a population somewhere in the millions as of the 15th century, before Europeans began establishing permanent settlements here and cooking up plans for what to do about all those natives.

"For 9,700 years we weren't reliant on government or anybody," says Calvin Helin, son of the hereditary chief of the Gitlan Tribe of the Tsimshian Nation and a Vancouver lawyer and author. Of course, there was no choice. There was no Indian Affairs department to provide housing, no provinces to issue welfare payments.

Put aside, for a moment, debates about land claims, fishing rights, self-governance and the hundred other aboriginal-related issues Canadians continue to wrestle with, and Mr. Helin sees an obvious cause-and-effect relationship.

After more than a century of increasing government control, the ability of First Nations to provide for themselves has diminished to a point where today nearly all bands are heavily or, often, completely dependent on handouts to survive.

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The conclusion is inescapable: If government money were the key to aboriginal prosperity, Mr. Helin expects they might be the most prosperous people in history.

"Money in and of itself can't solve anything," he says. "You can throw \$100-billion at the problem and you would get an even more massive welfare trap."

Mr. Helin represents part of an emergent wave of aboriginal thinkers and leaders who have begun publicly rejecting the status quo, wherein bands have been conditioned to seek sustenance from without -- Ottawa -- rather than from within, and instead calls for a reawakening of ancient aboriginal ideals of self-sufficiency.

"A lot of our people think that we are owed something because of all of the bad things that have happened," says Mr. Helin, who laid out a new vision in his book *Dances With Dependency: Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance*. "Basically what you are saying is that it is okay to sell your dignity and your control over your life for a few welfare crumbs. It's not . It is simply not acceptable that we be taking our women and children and throwing them to the sharks. That's what we are doing right now. We've got to do something that is different."

The desire to abandon the more-money-more-problems cycle that has created ever more dependency, while seemingly achieving little in bringing typical Canadian living standards to reserves, is being picked up across the country. You will hear similar calls from Patrick Brazeau, national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, who argues "the reserve system as we know it is broken and needs to be replaced," and the best way to fix things is "get rid of a lot of chiefs." Or Clarence Louie, chief of the Osoyoos Indian Band in B.C.'s Okanagan region, famous for posting signs such as "Real Warriors Hold A Job" around his reserve, and who spouts philosophies including, "Get off of welfare. Get off your butt."

Typically, though, for a huge segment of First Nations people, getting a job isn't as easy as simply a change in attitude, not if there are no jobs to be found in the first place, as is often the case on reserves, and not when the majority of people there lack a basic high-school education. Attracting investment in industry to create jobs, and improving education standards so people are ready to fill them, is something non-native communities figured out a long time ago. What aboriginals need is the ability to do the same on reserves.

That probably means, among other things, reforming the way First Nations are governed by bringing transparency and accountability to chiefs and band councils;

loosening Ottawa's grip on reserve-land holdings so that First Nations are free to develop, exploit and borrow against one of the few assets they have; and giving aboriginal parents some say in the way their children are educated, so they might have some shot at doing better than their parents and getting out of poverty.

To be sure, some of these ideas and the politically incorrect opinions of reformers such as Mr. Helin and Mr. Brazeau are frequently at odds with those of the establishment, epitomized by the Assembly of First Nations, and they remain outside the mainstream - - for now. But for a number of reasons, the moment for a new movement of aboriginal thinkers and leaders may have finally arrived. Canadians now face a series of economic and demographic factors threatening to conspire shortly in a way that would make the long-standing troubles on Canada's reserves tenable no more.

Growing up in Winnipeg's North End, on the wrong side of the Slater Street Bridge in the 1970s, it might have once been hard for Larry Morrissette to imagine the place getting much worse. The Eastern European immigrants and Jews that had once settled in neighbourhoods such as Lord Selkirk Park and Dufferin had scraped together their wages and migrated to more middle-class digs, leaving behind the shoddy, pre-war clapboard homes and flophouse taverns to thousands of poor aboriginals

moving in from remote reserves around the province.

There was plenty of poverty then, and plenty of crime. But things have indeed gotten worse. Unlike the immigrant class before them, the aboriginals have not moved up and out of the North End. They remain.

Thirty years ago, Mr. Morrissette was among the crews of young, aimless aboriginals, with little to do but get into, and cause, trouble. But it wasn't like today, he says. Not like the organized, lethal force that aboriginal gangs are now. There were a half-dozen gang-related killings in this part of town last year. "They basically organize around drugs and territory and making money behind that activity, and given the poverty within the community, it's a survival thing," says Mr. Morrissette. He runs an organization, Ogiijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (Ojibway for "warrior spirit"), that offers aboriginal ex-cons a way out of thug life, putting them to work renovating houses and getting them back to school.

In the five years since he started the group, Mr. Morrissette estimates he's helped about 70 to 100 former gang members, some of whom went on to university. But for every troubled young aboriginal he helps -- there are 30 at any given time on the group's

waiting list -- new gang members are minted every day. In many communities, it is no longer even an option.

"If you're native, it's almost like it's a given that you have to be part of some organization," Mr. Morrissette says. He packed up his family and moved to another part of town after his own son was knifed after refusing to join one of the gangs.

Aboriginal gangs are not just an urban phenomenon, either. Their reach extends into small towns, villages and onto reserves, where they run drugs and other criminal rackets, moving "fluidly on and off reserves" according to a report from the Criminal Intelligence Service Canada. Anywhere you find aboriginal communities today, Mr. Morrissette says, you'll find aboriginal gangs.

"If you go into North Winnipeg and you talk to the aboriginal community and you ask them a question, 'How many of the boys in your community, under 18, are gang-involved?' most often I get the answer, 'All of them,'" says Michael Chettleburgh, author of *Young Thugs: Inside the Dangerous World of Canadian Street Gangs*. "If you went up to Edmonton or you go up to the Hobbema Reserve, you will see in those communities a level of poverty like I see down in some big cities in the United States. If you are a young aboriginal male, growing up in that community where there is a persistent and an ambient sense of danger all the time, where there are ample drugs, where there are other gang-affiliated kids, when the economic prospects are marginal .

"People will ask me, 'Why are kids joining gangs?' I say to them, 'Why aren't they joining gangs?' "

For more than 100 years, the terrible plight of natives in this country has been one that most Canadians could conveniently put out of mind, the squalid living conditions and appalling social ills largely hidden from view on unseen reserve lands, the collective conscience soothed by the tens of billions of federal dollars spent on quieting native leaders. But the rapidly growing criminalization among aboriginal is not only bringing the problem to non-aboriginal doorsteps in a very tangible way. It is a straw in the wind, a worrisome sign that Canada's native predicament is about to get much worse, and soon, unless our approach to the issue is quickly and substantially changed.

"The consequences of young people not having a meaningful life is they're going to hurt themselves or they're going to hurt somebody else," says Michael Adams, founder of Environics Research Group. It is, he says, "in our enlightened self-interest" to wake up

to the problem. "We've got a lot of people who are not living with a standard of living and quality of life in a sustainable way where they can be good parents and they're going to have good kids, and those kids are going to be able to realize themselves. And we know that's the case on many reserves and we also know it's the case in our cities."

Calvin Helin has seen what lies ahead--a vision of what he calls a "demographic tsunami" and, he warns, it threatens devastation. As he sees it, there are several elements right now conspiring to present a dangerous wave of trouble for Canada when it comes to First Nations matters.

For one, aboriginals are significantly younger than the rest of the population, their birthrates significantly higher. There are likely a number of factors behind it, but the most obvious, Mr. Helin points out, is that "most aboriginal people are poor. The birth rates amongst the poor populations of the world are almost universally higher than the wealthy population. Essentially, what that is saying is that your biggest population activity is taking place in the poorest population, in the least-educated group of people."

When Statistics Canada released 2006 census data on aboriginals this week, it found 1,172,790 people in Canada identifying as First Nations, Inuit and Metis. In the past 10 years, that's a 45% increase in size, a growth rate nearly six times that of the non-native population, which expanded 8% in the same period. The median age for aboriginals, 27 years, is a full 13 years younger than among non-aboriginals. In Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where aboriginals make up the largest proportions, their median ages were 22 and 24 years respectively. About 1/5 of aboriginals are under 10, compared with just 11% of non-natives.

It's what Mr. Chettleburgh refers to as "the pig in the python," a massive cohort progressing steadily along the Canadian timeline. If anything like these rates simply hold steady over the next 25 years, there could be almost three million aboriginals in Canada by 2031, representing as much as 8% of the population. In provinces with heavier aboriginal concentrations and older non-native populations, such as Manitoba or Saskatchewan (natives make up 15% of the population in both cases, currently), demographers project that by the time today's high school graduates reach retirement age, aboriginals could very well make up more than half the population.

There would be little reason to be concerned with these figures if Canadian aboriginals were as healthy, independent and economically productive as any other group. But the reality is otherwise: Roughly half of aboriginal Canadians subsist on an annual income

of less than \$10,000, according to the most recent data; unemployment among aboriginals is 26%, three times the national rate; Statistics Canada calculates that more than half of native kids are living in poverty; $\frac{3}{4}$ drop out of school before completing Grade 12; the incarceration rate of aboriginal men is 11 times that of non-native men; of women, it is 250 times the rate for non-native women. There are a hundred more depressing statistics: dramatically higher rates of violence, injuries, health problems, suicide, addictions and on and on and on.

All of these terrible conditions persist despite the significant amounts of money that governments have spent on the native community. When it comes to the 500,000 natives living on reserve alone, Ottawa spends nearly \$9-billion annually. And that may soon get a lot bigger. Despite a current federal spending cap of 2% increases yearly, the population growth of aboriginals alone, well beyond that rate, could pressure Ottawa into expenditures several times that in the next few decades.

But there are unseen bills that may yet come due. For one thing, native leaders already consider current funding levels not nearly enough, persuading, at one point, Paul Martin's Liberal government to create the Kelowna Accord in 2005, promising another \$2-billion in annual aboriginal spending -- though the legislation was not passed before Mr. Martin's minority government fell and the incoming Conservative government shelved it. The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, meanwhile, is pressing for greater support for natives living off-reserve (currently the 60% of aboriginals living in urban areas receive only 3.5% of spending). The Metis, who number nearly 400,000 according to the latest census, have succeeded in winning partial aboriginal rights at the Supreme Court, and they are likely to seek equal funding, too. If they succeed through the courts, Mr. Helin predicts, Ottawa could one day face a doubling of total government spending on aboriginal groups.

"That is just completely not sustainable," he says.

The aboriginal population and the non-aboriginal population are headed in two very different demographic directions. When Baby Boomers, the largest working generation, retire en masse by 2011--living longer, consuming record levels of social and health care spending -- and cease contributing to the tax base, their mounting demands on the system are

fated to collide with the stark reality of a younger generation increasingly unable to provide for them.

"The question is, are we talking about \$36-billion [in aboriginal transfers] at a time when a third of the Canadian population is going into retirement, and will not be paying into the tax coffers of the country, and will be relying on very, very expensive social welfare programs?" Mr. Helin asks.

It isn't hard to sense a stewing frustration among some Canadian taxpayers today, not so much about the amount of money Ottawa puts into reserves and the bureaucracies that oversee them, but that all those billions seem to yield such deplorable results. Unlike other federal programs such as, say, medicare, where you can easily locate no shortage of people ready to debate both the pros and cons of the current system, start asking about Canada's aboriginal policies and virtually everyone who knows anything about it -- individual aboriginals, First Nations chiefs, politicians, academics -- agrees that our long-standing approach has largely failed.

That failure has apparently been, until now, a bearable one, from at least an economic point of view (the morality of perpetuating such misery is a different story). And whether it's the mounting expense, the rising criminal and militant culture among aboriginal youth, or the perverseness of sustaining a generation of bright, young aboriginal men and women on welfare at the precise moment in our industrial history that employers in this country are the most desperate for skilled workers -- a labour shortage that many economists say threatens to hobble Canada's international competitiveness for decades -- it is hard to see how the condition of aboriginals can be allowed to persist much longer.

"It's not just about them anymore. It's about us," says Andre Le Dressay, director of Fiscal Realities Economists, a B.C.-based firm that specializes in helping First Nations improve economic development. "Our potential depends on their productivity."

Efforts have come to naught for so long that bridging the gap between the quality of life, education and prosperity may seem irresolvable. In some cases, the solutions are, indeed, less than obvious. And yet, some problems have existed for so long that in many cases, certain improvements have become nothing less than self-evident, untried if only for their political volatility.

But the mounting demands for fresh approaches from some native leaders and, particularly, aboriginal youth may finally overwhelm the inertia and force us away from the ruinous, century-old, paternalistic, welfare-state approach to First Nations challenges. An Ekos Research poll conducted a few years ago for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs found that among First Nations people themselves, a huge

majority -- 69% -- ranked "improving economic conditions" as one of their top priorities.

In his book, Mr. Helin itemizes many ideas offered up as a "way out of the storm." They take the form of eminently sensible (if somewhat politically incorrect) ways of getting Canada's First Nations into a better situation using formulas other than the current welfare-dependency trap that ensnares them--by changing, for instance, the way local and national chiefs are elected, so First Nations can benefit from democratic representation and accountable institutions as the rest of us do; by reforming the absurd structures that frequently stand in the way of First Nations developing their own lands and resources to become more economically independent; improving the education and training of young aboriginals so they can take advantage, to the same extent as their non-native peers, of Canada's ample economic opportunities and a First-World quality of life, rather than the Third-World existence to which so many would otherwise be doomed.

Many aboriginal leaders and communities are already putting these ideas into practice, and with encouraging success. Over the next few weeks, the National Post will examine the key ones. Some may be considered drastic, particularly by those --and there are always a minority few -- who benefit from the state-controlled status quo. And perhaps, within the current, stagnant context, some of these proposed reforms are. Yet, it is hard to imagine how, given the desperate and hopeless existence among so many aboriginals today, anything less than far-reaching and even drastic measures will possibly do.

9.1 amount in billions of dollars in annual federal spending on programs and services for aboriginals

7.5 amount in billions of dollars that actually reaches First Nations

1 amount in billions of dollars spent on overhead for the ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs

615 number of First Nations bands in Canada

205 number of First Nations bands who report water system quality as unfit to drink

44 percentage of on-reserve houses in need of significant renovation

11 percentage of Canadian aboriginals living in "crowded dwellings"

27,000 average settlement, in dollars, awarded to aboriginals qualifying for compensation under the residential schools settlement

70 amount of dollars billed, in millions, by lawyers who negotiated the residential school settlement

4 number of times more likely a treaty-status Indian in the Calgary area will suffer a serious traumatic injury compared to the nonaboriginal population

2 number of times more likely they are to die of their injury, compared to the nonaboriginal population

800 approximate number of outstanding First Nation land claims

123 number of claims currently under negotiation

51 number of staff working for Indian Land Claims Commission

1 amount of dollars, in billions, spent by senior governments on treaty negotiations since 1993

6 number of weeks of wait time for a mother with a high-risk pregnancy on the War Lake reserve in Manitoba to see a specialist in Winnipeg

150 number of aboriginal doctors among the 60,000 physicians practicing nationwide

500,000 income, in dollars, in a lifetime, lost by an aboriginal male who drops out of school

8.3 amount of dollars, in billions, that aboriginals would add to Canada's GDP in 2017 if they had the same education levels as non-aboriginals

21 percentage of aboriginals reporting some form of physical or sexual violence from a spouse between 1999 and 2004

6 percentage of nonaboriginals reporting spousal violence in the same time period

8.8 average homicide rate for aboriginal people per 100,000 population

1.3 average homicide rate for nonaboriginals per 100,000 population

10 number of times more likely it is an aboriginal will be charged with homicide, relative to nonaboriginals

28,900 number of crimes per 100,000 people on reserves in 2004

8,500 number of crimes per 100,000 people on reserves in 2004

13,500 median income, in dollars, for a Canadian aboriginal in 2000

22,400 median income, in dollars, for nonaboriginals that same year

52 percentage of aboriginals who have graduated high school

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