

Between The Land And The City: Aboriginal Agency, Culture And Governance In Urban Areas

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Abstract

As Canada's Aboriginal population becomes increasingly urbanised, Aboriginal people are creating new forms of representation and raising questions about governance and social citizenship in urban areas which are potentially transformative. There is a marked contrast between Aboriginal discourses about the land and cities, with the land commonly represented as a source of life while urban areas are typified as sources of social problems. Three significant aspects of the emergent social context in urban areas are considered: changes in relative numbers of Aboriginal people in urban as compared with rural areas; the growth of internal transnationalism; and diversity and social inequality amongst urban Aboriginal people. These themes are explored by reference to urban Aboriginal people's work, Aboriginal political representation, and health in one Canadian city. It is argued that there are changing balances of power relations in Aboriginal representation and that Aboriginal agency in urban areas is having increasing effects, including the development of new discourses which reflect the strengths of Aboriginal culture. Urban areas are likely to be the locus of transition and change in the negotiation of sovereignty and social citizenship.

In order to survive...we must really come to grips with the White man's culture and with White ways... For to be fully Indian today, we must become bilingual and bicultural...so doing we will survive as Indians, true to our past." (Declaration by Elder Louis Crier, Cree Nation, Ermineskin Band, Hobbema, Alberta, 1972. Cited in Couture, 1996:44)

Introduction

As Aboriginal people in Canada have become increasingly established in urban areas, they have been creating new forms of representation and raising new questions about governance. Through their collective organisation and negotiations, they have begun to engage in transformational ways with institutions of government and public services. This paper examines some con-

temporary developments amongst urban Aboriginal people, with an empirical focus upon emergent issues in one Canadian city. It is argued that Aboriginal agency and culture are contributing to new forms of governance in urban areas. However, while Aboriginal people are successfully negotiating transitions in organisations and institutions in cities, the contingencies and conditions of urban Aboriginal life are continuing to maintain difficult circumstances.

There are three main sections to this paper. First, the contrast between Aboriginal discourses of the land and discourses of the city are noted. The symbolic importance of the land appears to be increasingly at odds with the realities of many Aboriginal people's lives following the progressive migration of Aboriginal people to urban areas. Second, three emergent aspects of current Aboriginal circumstances are considered: internal transnationalism, the changing proportions of urban and rural Aboriginal people and inequalities amongst Aboriginal people. Finally, these themes are used to frame an account of recent developments in Aboriginal politics and citizenship in one Canadian city.

Discourses of the Land and the City

The significance of "the land" for Aboriginal people in Canada is well documented (e.g. Carlson, 1997, Jackson, 1993, Kunin, 1998). The concept of the land is wide reaching, perhaps even without a boundary, for as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples notes:

'the land' is understood to encompass not only the earth, but also lakes, rivers, streams and seas; the air, sky, sun, moon, planets and stars; and the full range of living and non-living entities that inhabit nature (RCAP, 1996, vol 2, part 1, p. 117).

Its fundamental cultural importance, and its symbolic role in the drive for self-government and self-determination gives "the land" a pre-eminent position in the discourse of First Nation's rights. The RCAP illustrates the centrality of the land to Aboriginal life by summaries of representations and quotations from Mi'kmaq, Cree and Dene. In reporting the relationship of Aboriginal people to the Land, the Royal Commission states:

This relationship, they say, is both spiritual and material, not only one of livelihood, but of community and indeed of the continuity of their cultures and societies. (RCAP, 1996, vol 2, part 2, p. 448)

Moreover, in a distillation of the essential significance of the land, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples asserts that for Aboriginal peoples “the land is the source and sustainer of life” (RCAP, vol 2, part 2, p.117). If “the land”, including rivers, streams, oceans, and the sky are so important, what place does the city have in Aboriginal life, community, culture and spirituality? The land might stretch beyond the stars to infinity but it does not seem to include the cities.

A recent history of relations between Aboriginal and white people in Canada (Miller, 1989) made reference to cities only in its title and final sentence by quoting the last two lines of a poem by a Mi’kmaq poet, Rita Joe (1978):

While skyscrapers hide the heavens,
They can fall.

The first few lines of the poem depict the city as hostile territory:

Your buildings tall, alien,
Cover the land;
Unfeeling concrete smothers,
windows glint
Like water to the sun.

Discourse about Aboriginal people in urban areas has been tied commonly to conceptions of “social problems”. Peters (1996:315) argues, having reviewed writing from the 1950s onwards, that “from the earliest writing on aboriginal people in cities, their presence was constructed as a problem”. The nature of that “problem” has altered through the decades. For example, Aboriginal culture has been seen as an obstacle to successful adjustment to cities, yet government policy and government responsibility has also been identified as contributing to poverty, social and economic problems (Peters, 1996). Also, explanations and putative sources of the “problem” have varied from decade to decade and have had contrasting origins. Dosman (1972:8), drawing upon data gathered in Saskatoon in the late nineteen sixties, reported that “Native people form the hard core of the urban dispossessed, almost the entire minority lies outside the socio-economic structure of the city”. In the last decade, discourse about Aboriginal people in cities within a social problem framework has included, in addition to unemployment, welfare dependency and poverty, reference to high proportions of single parent families, and a focus upon health (e.g. Drost et al, 1995; RCAP, 1996: vol. 4). Concerns about Aboriginal children and youth have included sudden infant death syndrome, HIV-AIDS, edu-

cational failure and youth suicide (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999; Chandler, 1999; Peters, 1996).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' discussion of urban issues makes reference to a number of critical issues for urban Aboriginal people. These include cultural identity, governance, provision of culturally appropriate services, and discrimination (RCAP, 1996, vol. 4). The Royal Commission also notes "For some, the land that lies beneath the concrete is their territory" (1996, vol 4:612). Even so, there are acknowledgements in Aboriginal writing, of tensions accompanying adaptation to life in urban areas. For example, Patricia Monture Angus, when reflecting on living in the city, stated that "one can successfully live "Indian" in the city" (1999:8). She commented that "being Kanien'kehaka remains at the center of my identity" (1999:40) despite living away from her home territory, yet she acknowledges the difficulties of working in urban institutions and in writing of her migration from the city says:

I left because it became too difficult at that point in my life to live in a city and maintain a true connection to "Indian" reality (Monture Angus, 1999:9)

Like other discourses, these discourses about the land and the city rest upon a series of implicit or explicit oppositions. They also carry silences. They maintain sharp divisions between the land and urban areas, between nature and people and between Aboriginal and White cultures. The emphasis upon the land tends to maintain a silence on the agency of Aboriginal people, treating Aboriginal people as holding a position on the land, as if, merely of residence. Yet the significance of the land is a consequence of the success of Aboriginal people in developing and using their technology and cultural and social resources to adapt to their natural surroundings and to use it effectively to sustain survival and reproduce their cultural and social organisation. Also, a focus on the idea of the land as a 'source of life' also diminishes recognition that lives may be lost due to the conditions of the ocean, rivers and the forest.

With this emphasis upon the land, it seems that by implication, the culture, identity and governance of Aboriginal people is not associated with urban living, with participation in the life of cities or the governance of cities. Yet, despite the continuing symbolic assertion of the importance of the land by Aboriginal elders and leaders, there has been a progressive migration of Aboriginal people away from the land, off reserves and to urban areas, including large metropolitan areas. This migration is leading to changes in the relation between the land and the city and the emergence of new discourses.

Urban Migration: Relative Numbers and Proportions

The population census for 1996 recorded almost 800,000 Aboriginal people, about three percent of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, 1998). There was an equal balance between those living on rural reserves and those living in metropolitan areas, and rather more living in other urban areas than off-reserve in rural areas. Statistics Canada (1998: 3) expressed the approximate distribution of the Aboriginal population as follows:

About three of every 10 Aboriginal people lived on rural reserves, and another three in 10 lived in census metropolitan areas. One-quarter lived in urban areas other than census metropolitan areas, and one-fifth in rural areas other than reserves, often isolated in northern communities.

In total, 171,000 Aboriginal people (about one fifth of the total population) were estimated to live in the major census metropolitan areas of Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, Saskatoon, Toronto, Calgary and Regina. The greatest numbers were in Winnipeg (45,750), Edmonton (32,285) and Vancouver (31,140). This process of urbanisation, now at a point where more than one half of Aboriginal people live in urban areas is part of a long term trend, with progressive urbanisation occurring especially through the last forty years (Frideres, 1998).

Assessing the numbers of individual people in different locations is clearly important for the purposes of government, including the purposes of policy development and evaluation. However, in terms of balances of power and representation, the *relative* numbers of Aboriginal people who are in rural and urban locations, or who may be on-reserve or off-reserve is significant. As Kanter (1977) argues, relative numbers or proportions may be important in determining and transforming relations between groups. Kanter explored the issue of proportions as they affect group relations with regard to minorities, and more specifically gender relations where women were in a small minority (as tokens). Her analysis considered social processes where changes in proportions occurred within an organisational context of gendered relations. This in turn led to attempted reinforcement of existing power relations and modifications of consciousness and action. Similarly, the situation of Aboriginal migration to the cities raises questions about group relations which might be affected by changes in relative numbers. These questions cover potential transformations of balances of power in three sets of social relations:

- i. relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within cities (as Aboriginal people participate increasingly in negotiations with the representatives of key urban institutions and public services);
- ii. relations between on-reserve and off-reserve Aboriginal people (as urban Aboriginal people are empowered through the creation of new Aboriginal organisations);
- iii. gender relations as a result of the active participation of Aboriginal women in urban Aboriginal organisations (Todd, 1999; Todd, 2000).

Aboriginal people in cities have worked collectively, and negotiated with local health, social, educational, housing and police services to create new organisations. These organisations have been operating within spheres of governance and citizenship including protection of people from violence and abuse, family support, health care, and political representation. They also involve high levels of participation by women. As a consequence of this action, there have been implicit and explicit challenges to expectations of representation. New Aboriginal groups and organisations have been filling gaps, taking new responsibilities, and in some cases challenging traditional forms of Aboriginal representation.

Internal Transnationalism

The concept of nation is historically significant with reference to matters of land rights and treaty negotiations where different Aboriginal groups have separate and sometimes competing or overlapping claims. It is a concept which is relevant in urban areas where urban reserves are in place or being negotiated (Barron and Garcea, 1999). It is also relevant to understanding the circumstances of urban Aboriginal people where there are no urban territorial implications but where the relation between those in the city and those on the land is important.

Suppose we make the following three working assumptions in our account of urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada. First, suppose we accept the status of Aboriginal people as members of Nations with separate identities, culture, language, and a distinctive sense of spirituality. Second, suppose we accept that there are significant proportions of Aboriginal people in cities, remote from their origins. Third, suppose we recognise that significant numbers of Aboriginal people maintain contact with their home territories and peoples, routinely using channels of migration, exchange, and the media and information and communications technology. This is not a situation of solitary migration, with

potential consequences only of individual isolation and cultural separation to be represented through conceptions of assimilation. Rather, the situation is similar to that of transnationalism, where immigrant groups create transnational communities, linking their areas of origin and their new home bases.

Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999) express the novelty and consequences of contemporary transnationalism as follows:

While back and forth movements by immigrants have always existed, they have not acquired until recently the critical mass and complexity necessary to speak of an emergent social field. This field is composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt, 1999:217).

There are several indicators that the situation of Aboriginal people in urban areas might be considered as parallel to that of transnationalism. There has been an expansion in cities of Aboriginal organisations with cultural, social, political, and educational purposes. There are regular cultural events organised by and for Aboriginal people in urban areas, with Friendship Centres playing an important role. Meetings and celebrations are held in parks and other venues. Poles are carved in the grounds of community centres and their carving is used as a focus of activity for youth. Canoeing expeditions are organised. There are individuals and families who make regular visits, who keep in regular contact and who are involved in family and community based systems of exchange. Transfer of gifts, information, and expertise are routine. We can express this in more general terms by saying that there are regular patterns of exchange of economic, social and cultural capital between those in the cities and those elsewhere.

There is then, a growing and increasingly stable core of Aboriginal cultural and political activity in the cities which tends to support the maintenance and renewal of Aboriginal cultural identity and which co-exists with varying degrees of integration in the dominant economy. These activities maintain a form of integration rather than assimilation, one that facilitates further opportunities for mobility and exchange between rural and urban areas. The structures and effects of these organisational patterns may ease adaptation by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, a situation similar to that claimed by Portes for transnationalism:

Instead of being a denationalizing force conspiring against the integrity of the host society, transnational activities can actually facilitate successful adaptation by providing opportunities for economic mobility and for a vital and purposeful group life (Portes, 1999:472).

This aspect of relations between Aboriginal people on reserves and those in urban areas has been studied in the United States of America by Littlefield and Knack (1996:28) who reflect on the “constant interchange of resources, information and personnel between reservation and non-reservation locales”. Analytical separation of reserve from non-reserve situation hides the

extent to which reservation communities provide (though imperfectly) for the social reproduction of a labour force that flows into and retreats from the larger economy as needs and opportunity arise (Littlefield and Knack, 1996:28).

These patterns of interchange between urban and rural areas may help us to interpret the under-enumeration of Aboriginal people, attributed in part to the transient nature of the population. In British Columbia, the Vancouver Richmond Health Board (1999:8) sought to check the Aboriginal population in its area and concluded, with regard to mobility, “the data suggests that about half the Status Indian people have living arrangements that involve a rural community.” Within a period of three months, a quarter of the population had moved. The corresponding estimates of movement for six months and twelve months respectively are that one third and one half had moved.

Changes in relative numbers and internal transnationalism are two key features of the transitions of which urban Aboriginal people are a part. However, the social context of movement from reserves is not uniform and the experiences of Aboriginal people in cities are diverse. Some understanding of diversity amongst the Aboriginal population is also necessary to make sense of emerging issues for urban Aboriginal people.

Explaining Diversity Amongst Aboriginal People in Urban Areas

It is necessary to take a further step in this account of migration, of the consequences of increases of proportions of Aboriginal people in the cities, and of the emergent structures of internal transnationalism by recognising differences within the Aboriginal population. Analysis and explanation of Aboriginal diversity is not straightforward for evidence and argument about Aboriginal people is commonly racialized. Available data from censuses and surveys is

based primarily upon categories which emphasize lineage. (The 1996 Census was the first to gain data on Aboriginal persons from questions based on identity as well as ancestry (Statistics Canada, 1998)). Some comparisons of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture are cast in forms which depend upon simple bi-polar typologies, thus constructing models only of exclusivity and difference between Aboriginal and White people (see for example, Tanner, A (ed) 1983 (cited in Frideres, 1998). Some discourse by Aboriginal writers uses racialized accounts, appealing to categorisations and traditions based upon hereditary factors and “blood” (see for example, Alfred, 1999). However, as Winant (1998) comments in a discussion of contemporary meanings of racism within the United States of America, there are limitations to analysis based upon “racial lumping” or “the denial of variety, the tendency to stereotype” (Winant, 1998:762).

Racialized evidence and conceptualisation may even lead to explanations which exclude Aboriginal people from the frame or do not permit analysis of diversity. An example of this approach may be found in work by Frank (1996) in which reasons for social problems amongst Aboriginal communities are attributed to colonialism and government policy. Explanations which eliminate the agency of Aboriginal people and differences between them treat Aboriginal people as if they have been knocked down by the state and have uniformly remained acquiescent to their circumstances. Moreover, they hinder understanding of diversity within the Aboriginal population, within urban areas and on-reserve, in work, education, health, and cultural traditions. Yet there is accumulating evidence of the nature of diversity amongst Aboriginal peoples and some of its possible consequences.

Evidence of inequalities between Aboriginal people is available from census data at an aggregate level, from studies which explore aspects of life chances linked with band membership and from analysis of relations between on-reserve and urban life. Using census data, and exploring the patterns of earnings and the occupations of Aboriginal people, Bernier (1997) reports that Aboriginal people have a more unequal wage distribution than non-Aboriginal people. Aspects of cultural resources and policies at the level of bands or Nations are incorporated in Chandler and Lalonde’s study of Aboriginal youth. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) gathered data on every suicide in British Columbia for the five year period, 1987–1992. For young persons aged between 15–24 years, the overall annual suicide rate—when expressed in the conventional way of frequency per 100,000—was 24. The rate for young Native persons was almost five times higher, at 108.4 per 100,000. Comparison of rates between First Nations bands demonstrates that the variability amongst bands is

considerable, with 111 bands (accounting for almost one half of Aboriginal young people) recording no youth suicides in the five year period under study. Chandler and Lalonde link the differences between the suicide rates to a series of measures of cultural action by First Nations bands, which they take as indicators of cultural continuity. These measures include self-government, land claims, education, health, cultural facilities and maintenance of police and fire services. There is a variation in suicide rates between zero (that is, no suicides) and 137.5 between those bands with a high number of markers of cultural continuity and those with none. Chandler and Lalonde conclude: "the communities that have taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are also those communities in which youth suicide rates are dramatically lower" (1998: 239).

There are also differences within Aboriginal bands which may impinge upon the nature of the links between rural and urban areas, the outcomes of movement to cities and the life chances of those who make that move. Dosman (1972:79) using data gathered in the late 1960s in Saskatoon concluded that those from "leading families" on reserve tended to form the more affluent in the cities, whereas "the 'confirmed indigent' on the reserve move to the urban skid row".

Finally, aspects of cultural capital, of the form of migration to urban areas, and the nature of social contact in urban areas are factors that indicate difference in adaptation to city living. Littlefield and Knack (1996) argue that those within a family unit, with a relatively high level of education and who linked with existing social networks were most economically successful in urban areas. The differences between those who are living as transients in the poorer parts of urban areas, with concomitant problems of health and poverty, those working in the informal sector of the urban economy and those with professional occupations, or with established businesses, are marked. This diversity may be partly explained in terms of possession of cultural and other forms of capital which in turn may be traced back to intra-band or between-band differences.

Outlined above are three aspects of the context for urban Aboriginal development. Changes in the relative numbers of Aboriginal people located on- and off-reserve, the links between those in cities and those on-reserve, and diversity amongst Aboriginal people are contributing in different and complex ways to the emergent and transformational activities of Aboriginal people in cities. In the next section, these issues are explored by reference to urban Aboriginal people's work, politics and health in one Canadian city.

The Context of Aboriginal Politics in Vancouver

The overall population of the Greater Vancouver area now exceeds 2 million people. Estimates of the Aboriginal population show considerable variation. The 1996 census gave an overall total of Aboriginal people in Vancouver (31,140) which is the third largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada. Estimates from Aboriginal leaders and those who work with Aboriginal people refer to up to 60,000 Aboriginal people (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999). The Vancouver/Richmond Health Board (1999) has tried to gauge numbers for those people who are not permanent residents of the city. Findings suggest that the Status Indian group is the most variable, with estimates varying from 6,835 to 10,670, and then further adjusted to 13,340 to take account of assumed errors in recording.

The Aboriginal population of Vancouver is drawn from many Nations and includes significant numbers of Coast Tsimshian, Cree, Gitksan, Haida, Halkomelem, Kwakwa ka'wakw, Nisga'a, Ojibwa and Squamish (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, vol 4,1996). There are claims that people from all of the nearly 200 different bands of British Columbia live in Vancouver as well as people from bands in other Provinces. The Aboriginal population is dispersed throughout the city although the majority of the Vancouver based Aboriginal population live in Vancouver East (with estimates varying from 50–70 percent).

The majority of the Aboriginal population in Vancouver is a part of the workforce (18 per cent of Aboriginal adults were out of work in 1996), as it has probably been for the greater part of the last century. Knight's (1996) history of Aboriginal people's work in British Columbia refers to work in the fur trade, gold mining, agricultural labour, fishing, coal, lumber and salmon canneries. Aboriginal people worked in sawmills, on the docks, as longshoremen and in farming as the British Columbian economy developed and changed. They were involved in trade union organisation during the first decade of the twentieth century. More than a century ago, there was regional and international trade in Northwest coast ethnographic items. Knight writes that "By 1890 ornamental Indian basketry was being sold in specialty stores in Vancouver, New Westminster and Victoria" (1996: 156) and that during the 1890s there was a mission-initiated cottage industry at Sechelt making ornamental basketry for the Vancouver market. Aboriginal workers also participated "in the vortex of industrial and urban developments... in the Vancouver area" (1996: 233), working in sawmills and other mills at False Creek. Knight argues that "Wage work in the major industries...has been an intimate feature of Indian

lives for five and more generations” (1996:3) and concludes that “employment in the broader economy was an important aspect of native Indian history” (1996: 328).

As the economy has become dominated by services and knowledge-based work, some Aboriginal people have gained qualifications leading to their employment in managerial and professional occupations, in education and government. An exhibition of Aboriginal craft and artifacts at Vancouver Museum in 1999, had commentaries by 22 Aboriginal people. These contributors had all gained recognition outside Aboriginal communities for their accomplishments as well as within them and included a judge, a restaurant owner, and artists whose work had been exhibited in galleries in the United States and Canada. In the autumn of 1999, there were contributions by Aboriginal writers to the Vancouver Writers’ Festival; workshops by Aboriginal artists at a community centre; talks by Aboriginal artists at the Museum of Anthropology; and Aboriginal film festival and a production of a new play, “AlterNatives” by the Aboriginal playwright, Drew Hayden Taylor.

Contrasts between the circumstances of Aboriginal people in Vancouver are considerable. West Coast Native Art has broken the bounds of gift stores and cottage industry production and is currently undergoing a renaissance (Gustafson, 2000a). There is a multi-million dollar collection of 25 major sculptures and many other smaller pieces by Pacific Northwest Coast Native artists at Vancouver airport. “The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, The Jade Canoe” a sculpture in bronze by Bill Reid was purchased for three million dollars and is said to be the most costly art purchase in Canadian history (Gustafson, 2000b). West Coast Family Night, held weekly at the Friendship Centre in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, is for First Nations people in the city. Its stalls, dances, music, and speeches provide a contrasting testimony to the display at the airport, for they reflect the difficulties faced by many Aboriginal people in the city. In the Downtown Eastside, median household income in 1998 was \$8,748 (mean \$11,251), substantially lower than the median income for Aboriginal people in Vancouver as revealed by 1996 census data (\$12,388; mean income \$18,027 (Statistics Canada, 1999). It is estimated that 80 per cent of Aboriginal children are growing up in poverty, that there are high rates of underachievement in education, and that there are high unemployment levels (28 per cent) amongst Aboriginal youth (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999).

Transformational Politics and Social Citizenship

The context of political action by Aboriginal people in Vancouver is therefore one where there are contrasts between those with low and high levels of education, between those at the margins and those who are integrated with the cultural and professional networks of the city. There is now an active core of Aboriginal people with an acute awareness of their own and others circumstances, with the expertise to negotiate with representatives of the state and public services, the ability to mobilise collective resources, and a commitment to achieve change. As a consequence, Aboriginal organisations are negotiating locally in ways that show signs of having a transformational effect upon some of the circumstances of Aboriginal people in the city. These organisations have been formed to fill what urban Aboriginal representatives perceive as a vacuum in representation and governance. They are resolving some of the problems of jurisdiction, confusion and neglect identified by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol. 4, 1996)

Aboriginal people in the city who are active in Aboriginal organisations have responded to difficulties which, in their own words, include “no recognition of the urban Aboriginal voice”, where “so many urban Aboriginal people fall through the cracks”. This is in a setting where they argue that “poverty groups have thrived off the economics of pain” and “the solution isn’t in Indian Act chiefs”. Here there is a collective attempt to create “forms of government which are inclusive (and) democratic (through) a community driven process”. These quotations, taken from interviews with Aboriginal people who are active in Aboriginal urban organisations illustrate the reflection, and complex understanding of the urban situation which has contributed to the effectiveness of Aboriginal agency in the city.

The organisational framework for this community-based representation is the Vancouver Aboriginal Council. The Aboriginal People’s Council uses the slogan “Working together for off-reserve self-governance”. It is an alliance that was initially formed in September 1997, following difficulties within a previous council—the President’s Council. The United Native Nations BC and the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres withdrew from the President’s Council in June 1997, effectively bringing about its demise and leaving a gap in urban Aboriginal representation.

The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres and the United Native Nations formally agreed in November 1998 to establish a collective body

with the title "Aboriginal People's Council" that would represent off-reserve Aboriginal Peoples in Vancouver. The new Council was initiated in response to judgements that Federal, Provincial and First Nations policies were having deleterious effects upon Aboriginal Peoples living off reserve and was a move to remedy the absence of representation of urban Aboriginal people in policy development and implementation. The scope of the Aboriginal People's Council work is broadly concerned with self-governance and includes health, child and family services, education, housing, economic development, employment, land issues, social services, justice and taxation. It is based upon recognition of the diversity of Aboriginal people in the city and is inclusive, with an explicit mandate to respect the rights and interests of all Aboriginal Peoples. The Work-plan of the Council noted, in a "Need Statement" that:

Federal, Provincial and First Nations policies continue to negatively impact on Aboriginal Peoples residing off-reserve with little or no advocacy or input.

It is critical that the interests of the urban Aboriginal community be represented in the development and implementation of child welfare policies, the treaty process, and devolution processes affecting health care, education, housing, and employment and training. (Aboriginal Peoples' Council Workplan, nd, npr)

The Memorandum of Understanding between the BCAAFC and the UNN established principles for the new working relationship and contained proposals for a formal structure including an executive, an advisory council and a number of groups and committees. Four Round Tables were established for Health, Child and Family Services, Justice and Self-Government, which were attended by delegates from more than twenty First Nations organisations. The Aboriginal Council gained Provincial support with the Ministry for Children and Families and the Aboriginal People's Council establishing a Framework Agreement in November 1998 for collaborative development of Aboriginal child and family services for off-reserve Aboriginal communities. The proposal was to develop further working relationships, and to fund activities subject to agreement on a negotiated annual workplan. The Ministry also agreed to support training and to include the off-reserve Aboriginal community in programmes and services from design through to evaluation.

Collective action by Aboriginal people in the city, working through partnerships between people working in Aboriginal organisations and professional roles has also developed in response to concerns about the health of the Abo-

iginal population. The Children's Commission 1998 Annual Report (1999) referred to over-representation of Aboriginal child fatalities (over 20 percent of child fatalities, although Aboriginal children constitute only 8 percent of children in the Province), high suicide rates, and to the high proportion of Aboriginal children in care (about 40 per cent of those in care but only 2.5 per cent with Aboriginal or parent/relative placements). The same report mentioned that "Aboriginal parents and grandparents are coping with the effects of residential schools, loss of family, isolation, poverty and a sense of hopelessness" (1999: 7).

The emergence of an influential network of urban Aboriginal organisations and the potential impact upon Aboriginal services is made clear by the process and outcomes of a recent review of Aboriginal health by the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board (1999). Part of the background to the review was the problem of who held responsibility for health service delivery to Aboriginal people. The original briefing document for the review referred to "the jurisdictional confusion and debate between the provinces and the federal government" and "a fragmented, uncoordinated system that leaves many First Nations people, especially those who live in urban areas, unclear about what services exist, what they are entitled to, and how to access the services" (1999:76).

The process of consultation included community participation through an Aboriginal Population Health Advisory Committee and an Aboriginal Health Steering Committee. There were contributions from Aboriginal people and Aboriginal service providers through community meetings and a community forum, focus groups, small group discussions with family and youth support workers, elders, women, young Moms, and youth. The participation of Aboriginal community members, Aboriginal people working in community, health and social services, and those providing services to Aboriginal people is clearly documented.

The form of the recommendations for change in policies on health demonstrate a commitment to work towards meeting Aboriginal needs in ways which incorporate Aboriginal concerns and Aboriginal culture. The Vancouver/Richmond Health Board accepted the holistic perspective on Aboriginal health (including physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions) sufficiently to make an explicit comparison between this and its own perspective, acknowledging that Aboriginal people regarded the Health Board's view as excluding the spiritual element (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999). The strengths of Aboriginal people were recognised and held to "include individual and group persistence, and a determination to establish a rightful place in society and on the

land” (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999:vi). The proposed pattern of working, with a stress on the active involvement of Aboriginal families, youth and community, makes a clear division between consultation and consideration of “problems”, referring to “work with youth and not on a youth problem” (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999:viii).

Aboriginal people consulted during the preparation of the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board review of Aboriginal health and services, made clear their concern to achieve changes. They prepared a vision statement of their hopes for Aboriginal people in the year 2060. The following extract, shows continuities and change, a respect for tradition and acceptance of the need to embrace new ways of life. It is a statement that brings to the discourse of the city, a sense of tradition, resourcefulness, respect and pride. It is an attempt to create an alternative to the discourses and realities of social problems and to conceive the city as a place which, like the traditional conception of the land, is a source for the renewal of life and a place for healing:

We see an urban community where members honour and practise their distinct cultures and traditions. Here, respect for others and shared laughter enrich all community gatherings and celebrations. People take a pride in their culturally rich, open, and clean neighbourhoods that are free from alcohol, drugs, crime and violence.

We see a time when women and men are confident in their strengths and skills and are continually learning. Youth and adults are involved in all fields of work and act as positive role models. Children are healthy and happy and are trained and educated in both traditional and non-traditional ways. Elders continue their important role in passing on traditional wisdom, beliefs and practices. Together, stable extended families lead addiction and violence free lives and know they can easily satisfy their basic needs for food clothing, and shelter (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board, 1999:42).

Conclusion

Aboriginal people living in urban areas have gained sufficient power, through their increased numbers to create new forms of representation and to engage in transformational ways with government and public services in local contexts. These consequences of Aboriginal agency may be seen not merely as isolated examples of relatively independent dimensions of Aboriginal representation.

Rather, they may be far reaching in their consequences, as broader developments in sovereignty.

Issues of sovereignty are commonly conceived as being embedded in conceptions of the state (Latham, 2000). They are frequently invoked in consideration of territorial and land-rights claims for Aboriginal people. They are less commonly discussed as central to the struggles of Aboriginal people to be involved in their own governance in urban areas. However, as Latham notes “(s)overeignty can be and historically has been understood as an attribute not just of states but of other forms of social organization as well, operating within and across national territories” (2000:2). To clarify his point that sovereignty is not only exercised by states, Latham adds the term “social” thus deploying the notion of social sovereignty.

Within this conception of social sovereignty, the practices of urban Aboriginal people in creating organisations which impinge upon the local economy, health care, education, and the criminal justice system, may be seen as being centrally concerned with sovereignty. The actions of Aboriginal people in cities are, in a sense, parallel to the negotiations for sovereignty on the land. These new organisations and responsibilities have been emerging in a context of continued interchange between those in urban areas and those in rural areas and in circumstances where there are social inequalities between Aboriginal people. There are likely to be continuing periods of transition and a greater number dimensions of change in social and cultural relations between and within Aboriginal groups as well as change in relations between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in urban areas.

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