

Western Landscapes

Urban Aboriginals: Opportunities and Challenges

Mission Statement

The Canada West Foundation is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit public policy research institute dedicated to introducing western perspectives into current Canadian policy debates through:

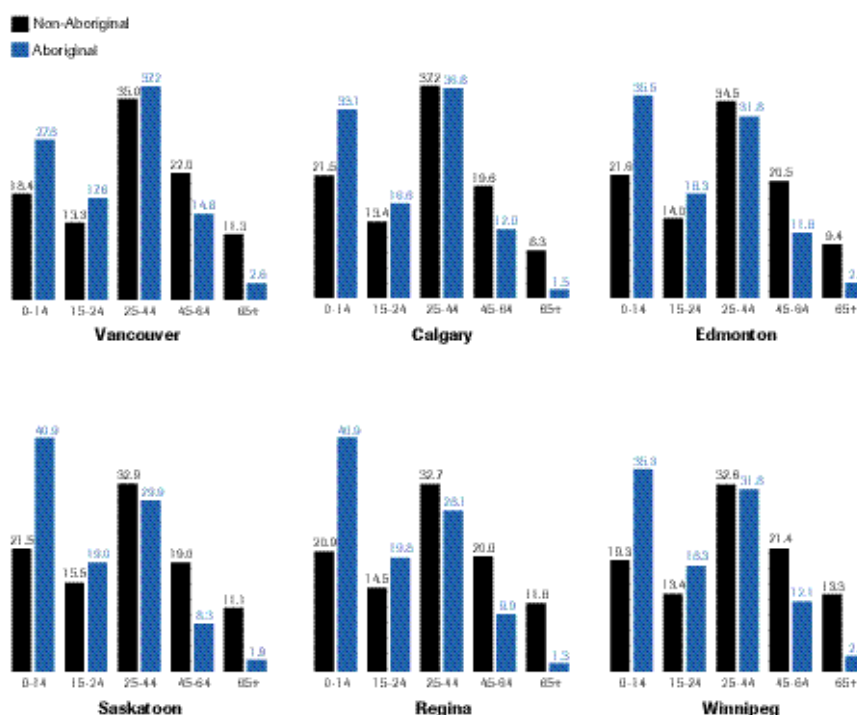
the production and dissemination of objective research to serve as a catalyst for informed public debate;

and

initiatives for active citizen education and engagement in the Canadian public policy process.

When Canadians think about Aboriginal peoples, their focus is primarily on reserve-based First Nations. However, more Aboriginal people live in urban areas of Canada than live on reserves, with a significant portion living in large cities. The urbanization of Aboriginal people is especially apparent in western Canada. While Aboriginal people account for 3% of the Canadian population, they represent up to two and a half times that share in major western cities. As a result, urban Aboriginal policy is particularly relevant for the West.

Figure 1: Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Population by Age Group (% of total)



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census

One of the most important aspects of the urban Aboriginal population is that, compared to the non-Aboriginal population, it is much younger. As Figure 1 shows, whereas about only one-fifth of the non-Aboriginal population in western cities is under age 15, for Aboriginal peoples the figure is more like one-third, with a low of 28% in Vancouver and a high of 41% in both Saskatoon and Regina. At the other end of the age spectrum, about 10% of the non-Aboriginal population in each city is over 65 while less than 3% of Aboriginal people are in this age group.

The fact that the urban Aboriginal population has a younger age structure than the non-Aboriginal population is important for the future of western cities. Skilled labour shortages are currently being experienced in some trades in western cities, and labour force shortages are projected throughout western Canadian cities in the not too distant future. The urban Aboriginal population offers the promise of a young and growing labour force that could alleviate some of these shortages. It is therefore imperative that Aboriginal people have the opportunity to capitalize on the amenities available in the cities of western Canada.

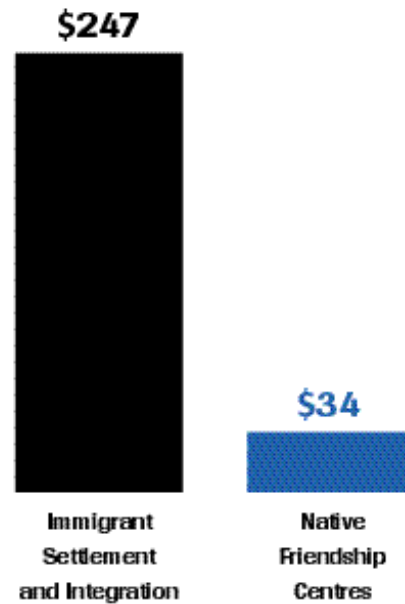
However, many Aboriginal people do not fully participate in the educational, economic, and social aspects of western cities. Rather, significant numbers of urban Aboriginal people face considerable challenges in terms of education levels, employment, income, housing, crime, family stability, and health. These challenges result in many being unable to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded to urban dwellers.

One particular challenge facing many Aboriginal people is adjusting to life in an urban setting. Every year, substantial numbers of Aboriginal people leave their rural homes for the cities to join the growing urban Aboriginal population. Upon arrival, they must adjust to an environment dominated by non-Aboriginal cultures and unfamiliar practices.

Many Aboriginal people find the adjustment overwhelming. For some, this means leaving the city soon after they arrive. For others, it means a life on the margins of urban society, complete with disadvantages in education, employment, income, and many other conditions. Whether leaving the city or living on the margins, every Aboriginal person who is unsuccessful at making the transition to urban life represents a double loss to western cities. The first loss is the potential contribution to the economy and social fabric of urban areas. The second loss is forgone tax revenues and increased social spending.

For years, the federal government's primary approach to easing urban transition challenges for Aboriginal people has been through its funding of Native Friendship Centres. Annually, the government of Canada transfers \$13.4 million to the National Association of

Figure 2:
Per Capita Federal Spending:
Recent Immigrants & Native Friendship Centres



Sources: Government of Canada; Statistics Canada;
National Association of Native Friendship Centres

Friendship Centres for distribution among 98 Friendship Centres and two satellite centres. This amount is not solely for urban transition services; rather, it is used by Friendship Centres to support all of their programs.

To place the federal spending in perspective, consider the federal government's commitment to new immigrants to Canada. In the same year that the government transferred \$13.4 million to Native Friendship Centres, it spent over \$256 million on immigrant settlement and integration. The discrepancy between these amounts becomes most apparent when seen on a per capita basis. As Figure 2 illustrates, federal spending on recent immigrants far outpaces support for Aboriginal urban transition. Federal immigrant settlement and transition spending in 1996-97 was \$247 per person who immigrated in the previous five years, while the government's contribution to Native Friendship Centres was \$34 per urban Aboriginal person. Perhaps this helps to explain the difficulties many Aboriginal people are experiencing in adjusting to life in western Canadian cities. ■

President's Message

Urban Aboriginals



Dr. Roger Gibbins

Over the past thirty years, Canadians have wrestled with a complex set of issues relating to Aboriginal peoples. The constitutional recognition of Aboriginal peoples and treaty rights, the negotiation of treaty rights in British Columbia, land claims across the country, the damage caused by residential schools and the establishment of Aboriginal self-government, have been difficult issues where progress has been halting, but also real.

For many Canadians, however, and particularly for those living in large metropolitan regions, these issues are both remote and abstract. They are remote in the sense that many First Nation communities are literally remote, far removed from urban centres. They are abstract because they do not appear to touch the daily lives of urban Canadians.

In fact, Aboriginal issues are far from remote. The majority of those Canadians who assert Aboriginal ancestry now live not on reserves, but in cities. The Aboriginal population is now largely an urban population, and will become even more so in the years ahead.

This new reality raises a new set of very complex public policy issues. For example, while the constitutionally recognized right to Aboriginal self-government may be relatively easy to implement for Aboriginal peoples living in First Nation communities, it is vastly more difficult to design for those living in Regina or Edmonton. How will we address the educational needs and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples within the public education systems of large cities? How can Aboriginal languages and cultures be protected and nurtured within the assimilationist crucible of the urban environment?

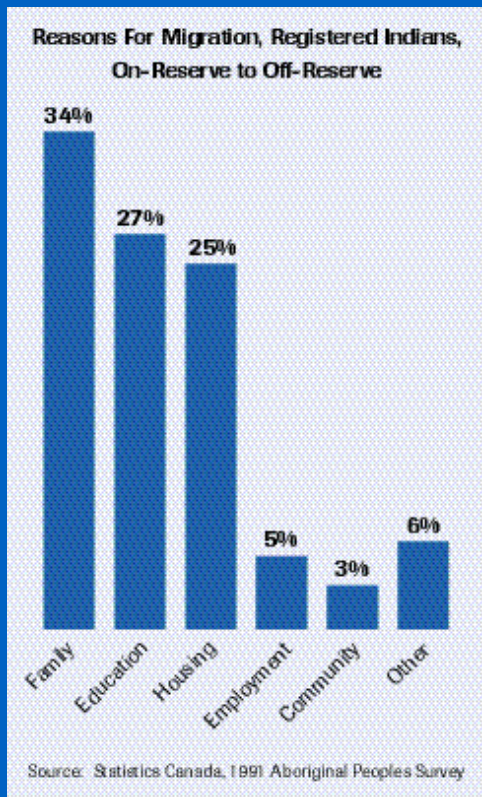
These will be difficult but also essential issues to address given the urban reality of Canada's Aboriginal population. To this end, and to serve as a catalyst for informed public debate, the Canada West Foundation has embarked on a two year study of urban Aboriginal issues, a study embedded within the larger Western Cities Project. This is new ground for Canada West, and essential ground for creative public policy research.

APPLIED RESEARCH

Why Do Aboriginal People Migrate?

Migration within Canada is usually based on a decision to pursue economic opportunities. Research in the 1960s found that Aboriginal Canadians tended to migrate from rural areas to cities primarily in pursuit of better living conditions and employment opportunities. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, studies confirmed that employment was the prime motivation for Aboriginal people to move into cities.

More recently, however, other reasons have gained prominence. According to Statistics Canada's 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, the principal reasons registered Indians migrated from their reserves were family, education, and housing; employment barely registered. Further research is needed to determine what currently motivates Aboriginal people to leave their reserves in favour of city life. Ideally, this work would determine whether Aboriginal people are being *pulled* into cities by the lure of opportunity or being *pushed* by conditions back home.



DON'T IGNORE URBAN ABORIGINALS

Alan Cairns, Visiting Professor, University of Waterloo

Even a serious student of Aboriginal policy issues needs to be reminded that about half of the Aboriginal population lives in cities. That population does not receive anything like a degree of attention appropriate to its numbers. Academic research focuses overwhelmingly on the reserve population on the road to self-government. The academic legal community turns out article after article in support of the inherent right of self-government for small nations of several thousand people, but is largely indifferent to the urban population.

Federal government policy, with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) playing the lead role, pays negligible attention to urban Aboriginal peoples. The exceptions – federal support for friendship centres, and the urban concerns of the Office of Federal Interlocutor for Metis and non-status Indians – are welcome, but are far from the equivalent in scale and financial support to the role of INAC for “landed nations.”

This policy bias is over-determined. It is firmly rooted in the history of “native” policy which defines federal responsibility embodied in the Indian Act as the detailed regulation of the lives of reserve communities. Those who left the reserve were either someone else’s responsibility or considered assimilated, or both. Up until 1982, when the phrase “Aboriginal Peoples of Canada” entered our constitutional vocabulary, the Métis – largely urban – were not included in Aboriginal policy. The lead Aboriginal organization, the Assembly of First Nations, is based on the chief and council of more than 600 bands, which limits its concern largely to reserve-based First Nations. (This may change as a result of the recent Corbiere decision extending the right to vote to off-reserve members.) The political

language of nation, the advocacy of nation-to-nation relations with Canada, and the rhetoric of colonialism all direct our attention away from Aboriginal urban realities.

None of this would matter if the urban Aboriginal population was minuscule – but it isn’t. It is huge. It wouldn’t matter if the urban setting was home to an unblemished record of success stories, as tens of thousands of urban Aboriginal people approached the non-Aboriginal majority in terms of employment, incomes, life expectancy, and other indicators of well-being. A few do; most do not.

The policy bias would be of limited concern if it could be argued that the Aboriginal urban presence is only temporary, and that there will be a massive urban exodus attracted by a litany of success stories as self-government sets in. While some net movement back to self-governing communities may occur, the effect on the overall distribution of the Aboriginal population will be marginal.

Therefore, there are two roads to the future – the self-government route for nations with a land base, and the urban route. While the bias of policy and research attention towards the former is understandable, in the elementary sense that we can uncover its roots, it is nevertheless irrational. To continue with the existing drift is implicitly to suggest that one half of the Aboriginal population is much less worthy of concern and attention than is the other half. To acquiesce in the prevailing relative indifference to urban Aboriginal peoples is to accept that we are trapped by a historical momentum that precludes addressing the too frequently unhappy realities that we can see in many of our major cities, especially in western Canada.

What are these realities? Not all are negative. There are numerous positive indicators that are too often overlooked – higher incomes, longer life expectancy, the halting emergence of an urban Aboriginal middle class fed by the dramatic increase in post-secondary education graduates. There is also, however, a grim underside in the inner core of several major cities, which we can glimpse from a scattering of urban studies. One author noted that violence was routine, normalized and “every-day” in the inner core. Another report wrote despairingly of emerging Canadian examples of American-style (Aboriginal) slums in Winnipeg, and to a lesser extent in Regina and other Prairie cities. A third report spoke of the troubling likelihood of the breakdown of the social fabric of civility in many urban centres in the absence of corrective measures. A fourth outlined the marked over-representation and exploitation of Aboriginal youth in the sex trade. The urban scene, therefore, is a mix of good and bad, as is also true of the self-government route to the future.

The policy message is clear. The urban Aboriginal population deserves no less attention and concern than are now directed to land-based Aboriginal nations seeking to employ self-government to achieve a fruitful blend of Aboriginality and modernity. We need not neglect the latter to pay attention to the second road, the urban road. It should be of special concern in the Prairie provinces where the challenge is greatest. It follows that leading roles must be played by the three provincial governments and the major urban cities working co-operatively with Aboriginal peoples. Succeeding generations, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will not forgive us if we avert our eyes and pass by on the other side.

Linking *policy*

Building the New West: Consulting Western Canadians

As part of its **Building the New West Project**, Canada West Foundation conducted a series of provincial consultations in May 2001. Held in Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, the consultations brought together over 200 community leaders to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing western Canada.

The feedback received from consultation participants will be integrated into a forthcoming Canada West Foundation report entitled **Building the New West: A Blueprint for Regional Prosperity**. The Blueprint will also reflect extensive research conducted by Canada West Foundation staff over the first year of the Building the New West Project, the results of a telephone survey* of 3,256 randomly selected western Canadians, the discussions that took place at the Western Builders Roundtable held in Calgary on April 29, 2001, and the input of the Building the New West Working Group. The Blueprint will be available this fall and will serve as a framework for informed public policy debate about what needs to be done in the present to ensure that western Canada enjoys a prosperous future.

To date, funding for the Building the New West Project has been provided by the Government of Canada, the Kahanoff Foundation, the Donner Canadian Foundation, the Government of Alberta, the Government of Saskatchewan, the Government of Manitoba, and the City of Winnipeg. Canada West would also like to thank the many corporate sponsors of this project including Air Canada, Alberta Energy Company Ltd., ATCO Limited, Canadian Hunter Exploration Ltd., Canadian National Railway Company, Edco Financial Holdings Ltd., Lincoln-McKay Development Company Ltd., PanCanadian Petroleum Limited, Petro-Canada Inc., Royal Bank Financial Group Foundation, Syncrude Canada Ltd., and The Westaim Corporation. Fundraising for the Building the New West Project is ongoing; to find out how you can contribute, please contact the Foundation by phone (403-264-9535) or e-mail (cwf@cwf.ca).

*The results of the telephone survey are outlined in **Looking West: A Survey of Western Canadians**. Copies are available from the Canada West Foundation by calling 403-264-9535 or via our web site (www.cwf.ca).



Canada West Foundation President Dr. Roger Gibbins addresses participants at the Vancouver consultation, May 17, 2001

J. Azmer

to people

Engaging Students

Canada West Foundation has been hiring student researchers for almost 20 years, and is proud to continue this tradition in 2001. The Foundation's Student Internship Program seeks out top undergraduate and graduate students to help expand the Foundation's research capacity and to provide students with experience in conducting research and engaging citizens in the public policy process. Over the spring and summer of 2001, three Interns are working out of the Foundation's Calgary office on a variety of research and public education initiatives.



Canada West Foundation's 2001 Summer Interns (from left to right): Carolyn Nyhof, Peter Todosichuk, and Sophie Sapergia

Carolyn Nyhof: Ms. Nyhof is conducting background research for the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Initiative, which is part of the Western Cities Project. She is assisting with two reports that examine federal, provincial, and municipal policies and programs that serve urban Aboriginal people. She will be returning to the University of Calgary in the fall to complete her BA in Sociology.

Peter Todosichuk: Mr. Todosichuk is working on the Gambling in Canada Project. He is exploring alternative methodologies to measure the socio-economic impacts of gambling on communities. A Masters of Economics student at the University of Calgary, Pete's research interests include economics of health and public policy.

Sophie Sapergia: Ms. Sapergia has returned for a second internship with the Canada West Foundation. She is working on the Municipalities in Federalism Project and is examining the implications of the current Canadian federal arrangement for global competitiveness of Canada's cities. Sophie is pursuing a BA in Sociology at the University of Calgary.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- **Looking West: A Survey of Western Canadians**
- **E-Municipalities in Western Canada**
- **First Nations Gambling Policy in Canada**
- **Gambling in Canada Special Report: Video Lottery Terminals in New Brunswick**
- **State of the West: Western Canadian Demographic and Economic Trends**
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vital links to our communities

The Canada West Council governs the Canada West Foundation. The Council is comprised of distinguished business and community leaders from the four western provinces. In each issue of *Western Landscapes*, we ask one of our Councillors to comment on an issue of interest to western Canadians. The opinions expressed below are those of Peter Meekison only, and not necessarily those of other CWF Councillors.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

CWF: Dr. Meekison, you were a Commissioner for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). What, in your mind, were the key lessons of RCAP?

Peter Meekison: The main lesson was that there needed to be a fundamental shift in approach to Aboriginal policy because past policies (e.g., Indian Act) were not working. We found that Aboriginal peoples need to be both self-governing and economically self-sufficient. Aboriginal peoples have an inherent right to self-government and in order for this to happen dependency needs to be removed from political and economic relationships, and the skills and capacity of Aboriginal peoples must be rebuilt.

CWF: Does the RCAP report provide useful guidance for public policy development relating to urban Aboriginal peoples?

Peter Meekison: Yes, the RCAP report provides policy recommendations on education, health, housing, and social policy relevant to where people are living. The report recommends three models for self-government: nation-to-nation, where First Nations would be self-governing on their own lands; public governance (e.g., Nunavut); and community of interest. The community of interest model is relevant for urban settings and means that Aboriginal peoples could organize to provide their own services such as education and child care.

First Nations communities in close proximity to urban centres may develop programs to provide services outside of their territory. For example, the Siksika Nation outside of Calgary stated, "we want to take responsibility for our people in Calgary." This sort of extraterritorial approach must, of course, be negotiated with the local governments involved so that jurisdictional issues can be resolved. Calgary is an interesting example because the city has recognized Aboriginal people as a fundamental part of the culture and history of the city and feels that they should be included in the policy-making process. Calgary is sometimes pointed to as a model for how other municipalities may enable participation.

CWF: What progress has been made in Aboriginal policy and relations since RCAP tabled its report in 1996?

Peter Meekison: Since the report was tabled some limited progress on Aboriginal policy has been made; however, it has been akin largely to "two steps forward, one step back" sort of progress. Although there has been a greater recognition of cultural needs, the recognition by government of a fundamentally new approach, which was at the heart of the Report, has not emerged. Overall I did not expect instantaneous change, but it has certainly not occurred at the pace or rate I would have hoped. We need action now.

Peter Meekison, O.C., Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Political Science, University of Alberta

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The Crucial Link

Since its inception in 1971, the Canada West Foundation has been committed to its mandate of providing citizens and policymakers with non-partisan, innovative research on issues of critical importance to western Canadians. The scope of this research covers a broad range of issues relating to economic and social policy.

This range is evident in two very exciting and challenging initiatives to be explored over the next three years – the Western Cities Project and the Building the New West Project. The Western Cities Project examines challenges faced by the seven largest western cities arising from the pressures of modern urbanization. The goal of the project is to find policy directions to help improve quality of life and make western cities an attractive place for businesses to locate and thrive. The Building the New West Project explores how western Canada can position itself, grow and prosper in the new global economy. What is the best strategic position for the West, and what public policy steps can be taken to prepare the West to maximize its potential in the new economy? Through this initiative the Canada West Foundation will assess current demographic, economic and social trends, identify ways that western Canada can adapt to meet future economic opportunities and challenges, and increase awareness of the options available to prepare western Canada for the new economy.

As you can see, the Canada West Foundation has embarked on a very challenging and timely research agenda for the next three years. However, none of this would be possible without the ongoing, committed and generous support of individuals and corporations such as yourself. We encourage all who believe in our Mission to become **Friends** of Canada West and thus help us to continue to provide independent, non-partisan research, and to introduce western perspectives into current Canadian policy debates.

Gladys Wonnick
Interim Director of Finance and Development

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