

Think City, Dream Vancouver:

Policy Brief

Urban Aboriginal Policy in Vancouver:

Current Challenges and Future Recommendations

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This policy brief examines the urban Aboriginal population in Vancouver. While many of Vancouver's citizens are enjoying the benefits of this city's growth with increased employment and a higher standard of living, there remains marginalization and disparities among different segments of the population. Aboriginals living off-reserve in urban settings are among the most significant group of these citizens who experience marginalization on many different levels of civic life. Aboriginal people in cities tend to be more disadvantaged than newly arrived immigrants and social indicators show that urban Aboriginals in Vancouver have significantly lower quality of life than non-Aboriginals. Census 2006 identified that Aboriginal persons comprise 2% of Vancouver's population.

Policy Problem

Urban Aboriginal people in Vancouver face challenges well in excess of the non-Aboriginal population, as indicators of personal and community well-being, including employment, income, health, and education will show. Aboriginal people are more likely to have lower education levels, lower labour force participation rates, higher unemployment rates, lower income levels, poorer health status, higher rates of homelessness and greater housing needs. This population is also overrepresented in the criminal justice system, both as victims and offenders, and are more likely to be subjected to domestic violence.

Governments at the federal, provincial and municipal level have not responded to the important needs of Aboriginal persons in urban settings. Bridging service gaps and improving living

conditions, while exercising cultural acknowledgement and sensitivity, is one important challenge. Improving social perception and attitude remains another. Systemic tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons, disagreements over jurisdictional responsibility, and the absence of a Vancouver-based municipal strategy have collectively contributed to a policy breakdown in this area.

Policy Alternatives

The three policy alternatives considered include: a government lead clarification and division of jurisdictional responsibility for urban Aboriginals, a renewed focus on reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, and a Vancouver Aboriginal Accord that would open a dialogue, identify needs and establish goals and initiatives with the urban Aboriginal community in Vancouver.

Recommendations

These alternatives are not mutually exclusive. Each alternative, if selected, would contribute significantly to the improvement of the quality of life for urban Aboriginal people in Canada. In speaking within the context of Vancouver, a municipal urban Aboriginal strategy is an important first step in reversing the marginalization of these groups and changing the lives of urban Aboriginal people. A city oriented strategy would provide much-needed focus to issues affecting this population. Urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada are not a homogenous group. A city-based context is needed to identify outstanding needs, understand current challenges and provide strategic initiatives that are realistic, goal-oriented and inclusive. An Accord would also meet the important objectives of strengthening the position of urban Aboriginal people in Vancouver,

improving relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Vancouver and developing policy that is based on indigenous knowledge.

Urban Aboriginal Policy in Vancouver: Current Challenges and Future Recommendations

Introduction

The City of Vancouver is undergoing a period of unparalleled growth. The 2010 Olympics, Western economic boom, and an increasing place on the international scene are indicators of a city on the move. Vancouver recently ranked the third best city in the world in which to live in a study that ranked quality of life determinants including social, economic, environmental and personal safety factors. There is no doubt that Vancouver is prospering; but, one must ask, are all citizens prospering with it? While many citizens are enjoying the benefits of this growth with increased employment and a higher standard of living, many citizens remain marginalized and disparities exist among different elements of the city's population. Aboriginals living off-reserve in urban settings, specifically Vancouver, represent a significant group of citizens who experience this marginalization on many different levels of civic life.

Census 2001 determined that 1.9% of Vancouver's population are urban Aboriginal.¹ Data collected in Census 2006 regarding Aboriginal peoples recently revealed an increase in the urban Aboriginal population in Vancouver. In the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area, 40,310 persons identified themselves as members of one of Canada's Aboriginal groups.² This is an increase of 3,455 from 2001.³

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) examined problems affecting
Aboriginals in the urban setting: "the stress of the unwelcoming city, confusion, the experience

¹ GVRD Policy & Planning Department, *2001 Census Bulletin #7 - Aboriginal Population*, (Vancouver: Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2003), 1.

² Data from Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Canada, 2008.

³ Ibid.

of racism and the inability to find employment push some into crime.’⁴ Urban institutions often conflict with Aboriginal cultural values, while additionally undermining a positive cultural identity. Aboriginal people in cities tend to be more disadvantaged than newly arrived immigrants and social indicators show that urban Aboriginals in Vancouver have significantly lower quality of life than non-Aboriginals.

This paper speaks of urban Aboriginal people as those living off-reserve and in the urban area of Vancouver. In this sense, it does not address issues regarding First Nations reserves which lie within urban areas, such as the Musqueam First Nation which has a large territory within the City of Vancouver.

Policy Problem

Urban Aboriginal people in Vancouver face challenges well in excess of the non-Aboriginal population, as indicators of personal and community well-being, including employment, income, health, and education will show. Aboriginal people are more likely to have lower education levels, lower labour force participation rates, higher unemployment rates, lower income levels, poorer health status, higher rates of homelessness and greater housing needs.⁵ This population is also overrepresented in the criminal justice system, both as victims and offenders, and are more likely to be subjected to domestic violence.⁶

How best to improve the life of urban Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver presents a challenge to policy makers. Bridging service gaps, while exercising cultural acknowledgement and

⁴ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1996), <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap>.

⁵ Calvin Hanselmann, *Shared Responsibility: Final Report and Recommendations of the Urban Aboriginal Initiative*, (Canada: Canada West Foundation, 2003), 5.

⁶ Ibid.

sensitivity, is one important challenge, while improving social perceptions remains another. As the RCAP found, “There is a strong, sometimes racist, perception that being Aboriginal and being urban are mutually exclusive.”⁷ Urban Aboriginal issues affect all Canadians who live in urban areas, as the RCAP further recommended, “Because Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people live as neighbours in urban areas, Canada’s cities offer many chances for building bridges between cultures.”⁸ Governments at every level have been presented with this challenge and have responded inconsistently. The various responses that have been employed, as well as the varying degrees of success achieved, will be examined and evaluated, and policy alternatives will be suggested with a final recommendation offered.

Background

Cities represent the best arena to foster the most constructive dynamic between celebrating and respecting diversity and instilling social cohesion around some common elements of a good civic culture and prosperous city life. In *No Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters examine the complexity of the public policy landscape surrounding urban Aboriginal peoples. There is no doubt of the potential relationship that could exist between this population and the cities in which they live, as Newhouse and Peters state, “Aboriginal people represent an important constituency in the attempt to build vibrant and attractive cities, and cities are increasingly important to the economic, social and cultural life of Aboriginal peoples.”⁹

⁷ INAC, *Report*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters, *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 284.

Census 2001 reported very important statistics with regards to this issue. It found that 80 percent of Canadians now live in urban areas. It also found that almost half (494,095) of the 976,305 people identifying themselves as members of one of Canada's Aboriginal groups, resided in urban areas.¹⁰ Census 2006 reported that 54% of Aboriginal people in Canada reside in urban areas. In the years following Census 2001, an influx of data, research and recommendations on this population was released. It has subsided in recent years, although there is an expectation that with the release of Aboriginal Census Data for 2006, attention will be refocused on this issue.

In November 2005, the Centre for Native Policy and Research (CNPR) published *An Urban Aboriginal Life: The 2005 Indicators Report on the Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in the Greater Vancouver Region*. This study undertook a wide-ranging assessment of the quality of life of Vancouver's urban Aboriginal population to better understand the social, economic and environmental conditions of Aboriginal people living in Vancouver and provide recommendations regarding future data gathering, research and policy developments.¹¹

Acknowledging the lack of information available regarding this segment of the population, the CNPR assembled information relating to indicators which provides an in-depth understanding of the urban Aboriginal population in Vancouver. Table 1.1 shows a selected number of indicators drawn from the CPRN study.

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| Urban Aboriginal Indicators in Vancouver |
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¹⁰ INAC, *Urban Aboriginal Strategy: Fact Sheet*, (Ottawa: Government of Canada), <http://ainc-inac.gc.ca/interloc/uas.asp>.

¹¹ Nathan Cardinal, *An Urban Aboriginal Life: The 2005 Indicators Report on the Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in the Greater Vancouver Region*, (Vancouver: Centre for Native Policy and Research, 2005), iii.

| | Aboriginal Population | Non-Aboriginal Population |
|--|---|---|
| Population in Vancouver | 40,310 (2% of total) | 2,057,655 (98% of total) ¹² |
| Life Expectancy (Both Male and Female) | 68.9 years | 81.4 years |
| Rate of Diabetes (Percentage of total population) | 7.4% Mortality Rate of 3 per 10,000 | 3.6% Mortality rate of 1.4 per 10,000 |
| HIV/AIDS Increase in new cases between 1996-2001 | 111% | 52% |
| High School Graduation Rates (2003/2004) | 14% | 82% |
| Incarceration Rates – Pacific Region (Percentage of total incarcerated population) | 21.8% | 78.92% |
| Unemployment Rates | 15% | 7% |
| Management positions in labour force | 6% | 12% |
| Social Assistance (Percentage of total income) | 16.8% | 9.6% |
| Self-Employment Rate | 3.9% | 7.9% |
| Homeless Rates (Percentage of total Vancouver homeless) | 30% | 70% |
| Source: Centre for Native Policy Research, <i>An Urban Aboriginal Life: The 2005 Indicators Report on the Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in the Greater Vancouver Region, 2005</i> ¹³ | | |

This table speaks extensively to the large differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver in terms of health, education, justice, unemployment, and welfare. Several indicators are particularly concerning, specifically those which show Aboriginal representation disproportionately higher than their population. Specifically, incarceration and homeless rates

¹² Data from Statistics Canada.

¹³ Cardinal, *An Urban Aboriginal Life*, 26-111.

have disproportionately high Aboriginal representation. As Aboriginal population is at 1.9% of the population in Vancouver, a homeless rate of 30% of the total homeless population is particularly telling of the current situation. All told, these indicators provide an alarming picture of the status of urban Aboriginal peoples living in Vancouver.

Current Urban Aboriginal Programming

Federal Government

The federal government has taken the most visible role in urban Aboriginal programming to date. The most clearly defined and prominent role the federal government has played with regards to urban Aboriginals in Canada (and Vancouver) has been the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS). Announced in January 1998, this community-based initiative was developed by the Government of Canada to improve the social and economic opportunities of Aboriginal people living in certain urban centres.¹⁴ Vancouver was selected as an urban centre designated for funding, receiving \$3 million in funding (over three years) in November 2003. Former Mayor of Vancouver, Senator Larry Campbell, stated at the announcement, “Aboriginal people make up a large and under-represented percentage of Vancouver’s population. Today’s launch provides us with an excellent opportunity to celebrate the successes of this strategy to help raise the living conditions for urban Aboriginal people.”¹⁵

This pilot project was initiated to “test innovative ways that the governments, local Aboriginal organizations, non-government organizations and the private sector can address issues that are

¹⁴ INAC, *Urban Aboriginal Strategy: Program Overview*, (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2007), <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/interloc/uas/index-eng.asp>.

¹⁵ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, *Governments and Aboriginal Leaders Come Together to Launch New Urban Aboriginal Strategy*, Media Release, (Vancouver: Government of Canada, 2003), <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/interloc/uas/ctkd-eng.asp>.

important to urban Aboriginal people.”¹⁶ Lessons learned from these projects (including successes, failures and shortcomings) will be used to inform the federal government how it can better help to address urban Aboriginal issues.

Through the Greater Vancouver Urban Aboriginal Strategy Steering Committee (GVUASSC) strategic directions for the funding were established, with a goal “to improve the social, cultural, and economic inequities of urban Aboriginal peoples living in the Greater Vancouver Regional District.”¹⁷ Following consultation with the urban Aboriginal community, four priority areas were identified: Youth, Health, Housing/Homelessness and Culture. Funding was allocated to twelve diverse projects, including a youth tourism employment project, an aboriginal arts studio, two aboriginal health forums, and a public awareness and mentorship program.¹⁸

In May 2007, former Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, the Honourable Jim Prentice, announced a renewed UAS, which will be “re-focused to ensure Aboriginal people can better overcome the challenges, gain employment, and attain a better quality of life.”¹⁹ Three areas of focus were identified: improving life skills; promoting job training, job skills and entrepreneurship; and supporting Aboriginal women, children and families. This shift towards an employment based strategy is consistent with Budget 2007, which focused funding toward aboriginal employment strategies. Total funding for this renewed initiative will total \$68.5 million over five years;

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Greater Vancouver Urban Aboriginal Strategy, *Strategic Plan*, (City of Vancouver: Vancouver, 2007), www.guvas.ca/strategic_plan/index.html.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Honourable Jim Prentice, *Speaking Notes at the Announcement of the Renewal of the Urban Aboriginal Strategy*, (Edmonton: Government of Canada, 11 May 2007), <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/spch/2007/ruas-eng.asp>.

however, the amount allocated to Vancouver is unknown at this point as are the specific projects that will be invested in.

Provincial Government

The B.C. Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation has shown limited initiative with respect to urban Aboriginal needs and issues in Vancouver. This ministry has maintained a central focus on treaty negotiations and agreements with First Nations. The province does support service delivery institutions that are specific to the urban Aboriginal population. These include Vancouver Native Health and Vancouver Native Housing. Vancouver Native Health is an organization which provides health services to the Aboriginal community in Vancouver with a goal “to improve and promote the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of individuals, focusing on the Aboriginal community residing in Greater Vancouver.”²⁰ Vancouver Native Housing, an organization funded through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and BC Housing Management Commission operates to “provide safe, secure, affordable housing for Aboriginal individuals and families living in the urban setting.”²¹ While the B.C. government has partnered with the federal government on the UAS, it has yet to make a significant contribution of its own with regard to urban Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver.

City of Vancouver

Current discourse with regards to cities in Canada has focused on the financial crunch that is being experienced in municipalities across the country. Downloading from provinces, a lack of legislative authority and a limited resource base are ongoing issues that have combined to put

²⁰ Vancouver Native Health Society, *Our Mission*, (Vancouver, November 5, 2007), http://www.vnhs.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=33.

²¹ Vancouver Native Housing Society, *About Us*, (Vancouver, November 7, 2007), <http://www.vnhs.ca/about/index.html>.

cities in a precarious and often awkward position with regards to service delivery. While cities are often the closest to and most aware of urban Aboriginal issues, they are also the least equipped to manage and provide for this population. The City of Vancouver has yet to undertake a significant role with regards to the urban Aboriginal population. While the City has identified potential areas in which it could contribute, there has not yet been a significant effort put forth by the City to support, engage or reach out to the urban Aboriginal community.

Urban Aboriginal Community Organizations in Vancouver

Community organizations remain the most visible resource for urban Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver. A diverse and wide ranging number of community organizations operate in Vancouver to meet the needs of the urban Aboriginal population. The Vancouver Aboriginal Council, the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, the Urban Native Youth Association, and the Aboriginal Mother Centre Society, to name only a few, provide direct assistance to Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver. These organizations are seen as the first stop for Aboriginals in Vancouver who may require assistance on a number of issues, including housing, employment, training and justice. These organizations are not-for-profit and require funding from the federal and provincial governments in order to provide these important services. This puts these organizations in a difficult position. The funding process is notoriously cumbersome and time-consuming, most often resulting in limited funding not adequate to meet the needs of the population utilizing these services. These organizations play a large role in the lives of urban Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver, much more significant than any level of government.

Objectives

There are several important objectives that must be met in developing policy choices with regards to urban Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver:

- Strengthen the position of urban Aboriginal people in Vancouver. It is imperative that the poor living conditions that are a reality for many urban Aboriginal people in Vancouver are improved. In order to accomplish this, urban Aboriginal people must have fair and equitable access to services offered to the non-Aboriginal population, as well as a defined role within the City of Vancouver to encourage civic engagement.
- Improve relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens in Vancouver. At Think City, a recent citizen engagement conference, one attendee stated that he would like to know his Aboriginal neighbour better. Improving relations between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population would contribute to improving the quality of life for Aboriginal persons.
- Develop policy that is based upon indigenous knowledge. This objective seeks to maintain cultural distinctiveness in the policy process and outcome. Approaches that do not consider this aspect will most likely not be successful and will be seen as continuing a process of assimilation.²²

Current Barriers to Positive Policy Development

Systemic Tensions between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Citizens

There continues to exist racial tensions towards urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada. As stated in the RCAP, “Aboriginal cultures have been perceived as being incompatible with the demands of industrialized urban society.”²³ This racism has created an alienation of much of the Aboriginal

²² Newhouse & Peters, *Not Starngers*, 283.

²³ INAC, *Report*.

population within Vancouver. To date, governments have not done enough in terms of fostering a better intercultural understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. This lack of understanding produces a disconnection between Aboriginal citizens and the rest of society, resulting in exclusion from the job market, falling educational participation and low civic engagement.

Absence of Vancouver Based Strategy

The City of Vancouver is without an urban Aboriginal strategy or policy. Urban Aboriginal populations are expected to grow, as cities provide increased opportunities for Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, as expected, the release of Aboriginal census data in January 2008 revealed that Vancouver's Aboriginal population increased by 9.4%. While Vancouver's Aboriginal population is small in comparison with other Canadian cities, the absence of a defined municipal strategy is stifling policy development, civic engagement and representation in regards to urban Aboriginal peoples.

Jurisdictional Challenges

In a review of current literature, the issue which creates the most difficult policy environment with respect to urban Aboriginal peoples relates to jurisdictional issues. In 1996, the RCAP acknowledged this issue:

“Wrangling over jurisdiction has impeded urban Aboriginal people's access to services. Intergovernmental disputes, federal and provincial off-loading, lack of program coordination, exclusion of municipal governments and urban Aboriginal groups from discussions and negotiations on policy and jurisdictional issues, and confusion regarding the political representation of Aboriginal people in cities have all contributed to a situation

that has had serious adverse effects on the ability of Aboriginal people to gain access to appropriate services in urban centres.”²⁴

In *Shared Responsibility: Final Report and Recommendations of the Urban Aboriginal Initiative*, the Canada West Foundation highlighted how intergovernmental disagreements over responsibility have contributed to hindering the progress of urban Aboriginal policy. The federal government insists its primary responsibility is with respect to First nation’s people on-reserve, with provincial governments holding responsibility for all other Aboriginal people. However, provincial governments have long insisted that Aboriginal people are the primary responsibility of the federal government.²⁵ This disconnection between governments has resulted in programming that is disjointed and incoherent.

Dwight A. Dorey, former National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, which advocates for Aboriginal people living off-reserve, commented on this issue as well. In a 2004 speech, Chief Dorey stated that jurisdictional barriers have affected progress in dealing with the rights and needs of off-reserve Aboriginal people, further stating that urban Aboriginals are “tired of being the ‘hot potato’ being tossed back and forth.”²⁶ Chief Dorey went on to state “without some kind of joint strategy or agency to deal with the rights and needs of all our people, we will likely be left to flounder, and continue adding to the social envelop, seeing more and more of our people on the streets, in the shelters and in the jails all at a significantly higher cost than what it would take to fix the problem, just as the RCAP reported.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hanselmann, *Shared Responsibility*, 7.

²⁶ Dwight A. Dorey, *Notes for a Presentation on Urban Aboriginal Policies*, (Ottawa: Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, 2004), 9.

²⁷ Dorey, *Notes*, 10.

The City of Vancouver has also added its concerns, stating “Urban Aboriginal populations are growing at a very fast rate, but the Federal and Provincial governments are not adapting to this reality fast enough to ensure that off-reserve Aboriginal peoples have access to programs and services that on-reserve Aboriginal people have.”²⁸ The City goes further, suggesting that without some type of agreement, this population “will continue to suffer the socio-economic burdens associated with being a marginalized group of people caught between bureaucracies.”²⁹ This disjuncture has also created service gaps in which important areas of policy are overlooked and not addressed by either level of government.

Policy Alternatives

Clarify Jurisdictional Responsibility of Urban Aboriginals

The jurisdictional maze of urban Aboriginal responsibility is a problem negatively impacting urban Aboriginal peoples across Canada. Analysts in this area have suggested several different ways this environment could be improved:

- Appointment of a Federal Minister of Aboriginal Relations with responsibility for overall policy leadership on urban Aboriginal matters;
- Federal or Provincial designation of responsibility for urban Aboriginals;
- Formal and institutionalized intergovernmental coordination and cooperation.

There is a need to reduce the overlap of services in areas of training, homelessness, employment and justice, which has caused confused and uncoordinated programming. Service gaps, in which no policy exists, were found in areas of income support, suicide, and human rights.³⁰ As well, the federal government does not fund urban transition programs to the same degree that it funds

²⁸ City of Vancouver, *Inventory of Aboriginal Services, Issues and Initiatives in Vancouver*, (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2007), <http://www.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/aboriginal/tools/directory/index.htm>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hanselmann, *Shared Responsibility*, 5.

transition programs for recent immigrants to Canada.³¹ Urban Aboriginal transition programming receives less than five cents for every dollar spent on immigrant settlement and transition.³² A more coordinated and clear approach by either the federal or provincial government (or both) could address these problems.

Improved coordination and more visible jurisdictional responsibility could allow for programming that is long-term in nature, with identified goals and realistic benchmarks. Most programs which currently exist in this field are carried out with limited time frames and goals, prohibiting any long-term planning and success. As noted by Calvin Hanselmann of the Canada West Foundation, “programs and projects aimed at improving conditions among urban Aboriginal people cannot make adequate progress if they are operational for only a year or two.”³³

The need for increased clarity in this area is imperative. Jurisdictional bickering over responsibility of urban Aboriginal peoples has created a stalled policy environment for too long. In order to commit to improving the lives of those within the urban Aboriginal community, federal and provincial governments must identify the best arrangement to service this growing population.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 9.

A Renewed Focus on Reconciliation

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples proposed a vision of a renewed relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens based on four principles: Mutual Recognition, Mutual Respect, Sharing and Mutual Responsibility. Each of these principles aims to provide solutions to difficulties which have been experienced between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens. The Royal Commission emphasized the need for all levels of government to build new relationships with Canada's Aboriginal communities, using the four guiding principles to provide a solid foundation. As noted in the Royal Commission Report, Darryl Klassen of the Aboriginal Rights Coalition stated, "People can be active and responsible members of their communities only if they have a sense of their own worth and the conviction that what they say and do in both the public and the private sphere can make a significant contribution. However, this sense of self-respect is based in part on society's recognition of the value of an individual's activities and goals."³⁴

Reconciliation with the Aboriginal population in Canada has been a slow and fragmented process. While the federal government has issued a statement of reconciliation, there remains a significant void between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in many parts of Canada. A strong argument can be made that the federal government has not done enough to facilitate an effective reconciliation process, causing the disconnection between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals to grow over time.

Australia is a country that also has an historical need for reconciliation between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. Reconciliation Australia is the premier national organization

³⁴ INAC, *Report*.

which seeks to build and promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians for the betterment of the country. Through a diverse number of projects and partnerships, Reconciliation Australia seeks to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and move forward with a better understanding of the past and how the past affects the lives of Indigenous people today. This organization was born out of a federal act, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act. This organization, with support of the government, celebrates National Reconciliation Week. First celebrated in 1996, this week aims to give people across Australia the opportunity to focus on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and to reflect on achievements so far and on what must still be done to achieve reconciliation.³⁵ Across the country, thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians take part in events that further the building of relationships and develop new ways in which to further improve the lives of Indigenous Australians.

Reconciliation between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in Vancouver and Canada is a crucial step in achieving an inclusive, respectful city for all citizens. One Vancouver-based organization has recognized this need and is working to make reconciliation a priority for all Canadians. The People Together Foundation was created in 2004 in an effort to improve relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. This non-profit charitable society has a common goal to help motivate individuals and organizations to take ownership of their personal and collective responsibilities for reconciliation. This group has looked to other countries, including Australia, who have undertaken reconciliation projects with success in order to develop a local reconciliation model that will help to improve relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, facilitate the full participation of Aboriginal people in all aspects of

³⁵ Reconciliation Australia, *National Reconciliation Week*, <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/i-cms.jsp?page=97>.

Canadian social, economic and community life, advance public education in relation to the history, culture, circumstances and aspirations of Aboriginal people and communities in Canada³⁶.

The most ambitious upcoming project, “The 2008 Walk for Reconciliation” will bring citizens from around British Columbia together to “create an event that signifies the turning of a page in our history and celebrates new relationships, new possibilities and a future that reflects the very best we have to offer.”³⁷ A similar walk was held in Sydney, Australia in May 2000, symbolizing the bridging of relationships between Aboriginal and other Australians. Reconciliation is an important component of the urban Aboriginal challenge. The longer it is avoided, the longer urban Aboriginal peoples will remain marginalized in society.

As Chief Leonard George, President of the People Together Foundation states, “It is not too late to revisit the treasures of our histories and teachings in a way that enables us to take steps toward a better future together: one of health, vitality, strength and dignity for Aboriginal peoples and all nations inhabiting this earth. But for this to happen we must first learn to walk with one another. I believe we must reconcile within ourselves, with each other, and with Mother Earth.”³⁸ All levels of government can and should increase their commitment to the goal of reconciliation. The federal, provincial and municipal governments each have the ability to assist in this regard. As Aboriginal issues affect all Canadians who live in urban areas, positive relationships can contribute to the health and vitality of cities and those who live within them.

³⁶ People Together Foundation, *2008 Walk for Reconciliation*, <http://www.peopletogogether.ca>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

City Accord

The City of Vancouver has identified several ways in which it could better engage the Aboriginal population. The idea of creating a ‘Vancouver Aboriginal Accord’ is one suggestion that should be given further attention. The City of Vancouver has identified that the development of such an Accord could “provide a means to identify priorities, and collectively work towards concrete plans to address them.”³⁹ Other Canadian cities with large urban Aboriginal populations have developed such accords, including Edmonton and Winnipeg.

The cities of Winnipeg and Edmonton, with the largest and second largest urban Aboriginal population respectively, have separately instituted Aboriginal centred accords which focus on strengthening the relationship between each city and its urban Aboriginal population. Each city provides an excellent example of how the City of Vancouver could do more to create a dialogue, identify needs and establish goals and initiatives with the urban Aboriginal community.

The City of Edmonton, with an Aboriginal population of 52,100 in 2006, addressed its increasing urban Aboriginal population with an Accord that responds to a growing awareness of the needs and aspirations of urban Aboriginal peoples residing in Edmonton.⁴⁰ The City initiated a thoroughly consultative process with Aboriginal communities in Edmonton to develop and institute community-identified guiding principles to improve the relationship between the City and its urban Aboriginal population, which include.

The Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative has four objectives:

³⁹ City of Vancouver, *Inventory*.

⁴⁰ City of Edmonton, *Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative*, <http://www.edmonton.ca>.

1. Improve relationships between the City and urban Aboriginal communities;
2. Improved hiring and retention of Aboriginal staff by the City;
3. Improved City-mandated services for Aboriginal people;
4. Facilitation of an inclusive process for action planning and stakeholder investment based on priorities identified by the urban Aboriginal communities.⁴¹

This initiative provided tangible results that are working to improve the lives of Aboriginal people in Edmonton. These results include the establishment of the first Aboriginal Relations office, with responsibility to assist members of Aboriginal communities, as well as serves as a primary point of contact with the City on Aboriginal matters. This office plays a large role in the development, promotion and support of urban Aboriginal strategies within the City, including the building and sustaining of civic relations with urban Aboriginal people and local and regional organizations that serve their interests, increasing Aboriginal participation in the City of Edmonton workforce and ensuring City-mandated services address the needs of Aboriginal people in Edmonton.⁴²

Winnipeg's urban Aboriginal population was 68,380 according to Census 2006, comprising 10% of its total population.⁴³ This is the largest and fastest growing urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The City of Winnipeg's *First Steps: Municipal Aboriginal Pathways* (MAP) was created in 2003 to address the needs of the growing Aboriginal population. MAP defines a policy framework to open the door to a new area of co-operation between the City and Winnipeg's Aboriginal Community.⁴⁴ Winnipeg has taken recommendations of the RCAP, including a commitment to a renewed relationship with the Aboriginal community. As the RCAP stated,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² City of Edmonton, *Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative*.

⁴³ Data from Statistics Canada.

⁴⁴ City of Winnipeg, *First Steps: Municipal Aboriginal Pathways*, (Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg, 2006), 1.

“The new partnership we envision is much more than a political or institutional one. It must be a heartfelt commitment among peoples to live together in peace, harmony and mutual support.”⁴⁵

In MAP, the City of Winnipeg identified five specific policy areas to focus on, including employment, economic development, safety, quality of life and outreach and education.⁴⁶

The City of Winnipeg’s Accord demonstrates that with effective partnerships and creative use of municipal tools, the City can identify pathways to promote sustainable community development to build a better future for Winnipeg’s Aboriginal citizens. This report also demonstrates Winnipeg’s ongoing commitment to building a relationship with the Aboriginal community that is mutually beneficial to the City and the urban Aboriginal population: “The City must recognize that issues and elements concerning and embracing the growing Aboriginal population are of paramount importance to the City’s future economic development prospects, and must be dealt with concretely, genuinely and collaboratively.”⁴⁷ The report includes an expansive and dynamic policy framework to address current and future Aboriginal issues in Winnipeg through a series of strategic initiatives that address the five policy areas identified.

Using the Accords of both cities as an example, the City of Vancouver should look to the progress made by Edmonton and Winnipeg’s forward-thinking leadership on this issue.

⁴⁵ INAC, *Report*.

⁴⁶ City of Winnipeg, *First Steps*, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

Recommendation

While each alternative is important, none alone can solve the numerous issues facing urban Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver. Each one acts as barrier to meaningful improvements in the lives of urban Aboriginal peoples. Questions over jurisdictional responsibility have long impeded the development of valuable policies and programs. The lack of public understanding and education towards Aboriginal peoples in Canada has created systemic obstacles in improving the lives of this population. And without cooperative involvement from the city, the urban Aboriginal population within Vancouver will continue to live on the fringes of civic society. While all three must be taken seriously and made a priority by each level of government, as this paper speaks to the urban Aboriginal population in Vancouver, a Vancouver Aboriginal Accord is the policy alternative which is recommended.

A Vancouver-specific urban Aboriginal strategy is an important first step in improving the lives of urban Aboriginal peoples. A city oriented strategy would provide much-needed focus to issues affecting this population. Urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada are not a homogenous group. The Aboriginal population in Vancouver is different than those in Winnipeg, Calgary or Edmonton. A city-based context is needed to identify outstanding needs, understand current challenges and provide strategic initiatives that are realistic, goal-oriented and inclusive. An Accord would also meet the objectives earlier stated, which include strengthening the position of urban Aboriginal people in Vancouver, improving relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Vancouver and developing policy that is based on indigenous knowledge.

The City of Vancouver should look to Winnipeg's MAP for a better understanding of the dynamic, cooperative and forward-focused relationship a municipality can develop with its urban

Aboriginal population. This accord should be developed with full participation and involvement of the urban Aboriginal community and community organizations, as well as the non-Aboriginal community. The City of Edmonton provided an excellent example of how to establish an Aboriginal-lead process. In developing the Edmonton Aboriginal Accord, the City engaged an Elders Circle to provide wisdom and advice on an ongoing basis. During the consultative process, over 1800 people took part in several information sessions, participated in issue-focused talking circles and completed Aboriginal focused surveys. This Aboriginal-lead process was most effective in identifying and prioritizing the needs and issues of urban Aboriginal communities in Edmonton.

The Accord should also be developed with a strong focus on Aboriginal culture and practices. Encouraging collaboration in the development of such an accord marks the first step in fostering a positive relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and could play a strong role in the reconciliation between both communities. In order to create and foster a healthy and prosperous city for all citizens, the City of Vancouver must embrace the need for a Vancouver Aboriginal Accord.

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