BIMAADIZIWIN: THE CITY AS HOME FOR URBAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

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Despite the challenges of living in an environment made more difficult by racism and discrimination, Aboriginal communities report high levels of satisfaction with life in the city. This finding points to a timely need to improve the inclusiveness of urban places through engagement at the municipal level. Municipalities are the closest level of Canadian government to urban Aboriginal peoples, but, at the same time, are often the farthest away as Aboriginal peoples are seen as the responsibility of the federal government. Aboriginal peoples have a history of urban life that is often overlooked and enhancing the potential for bimaadiziwin, or the good life, in the city promises to enrich the urban landscape and the interactions that take place within it.

A challenge facing municipal leaders is to find ways to help improve the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in order to make the city a more amicable and welcoming environment. Unfortunately, a collection of data evidences the challenges that continue to be experienced by urban aboriginal communities. In 2011, the Environics Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (UAPS) documented the life experiences and aspirations of Aboriginal individuals living in 11 urban centres across Canada[1]. It reported an almost universal experience of discrimination, prejudice, and racism directed towards urban Aboriginal peoples. It followed in the wake of a 2007 Urban Aboriginal Task Force in Ontario report which found similar experiences. More recently, in 2012, a research review report for the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network concluded that, "despite significant anti-racism and educational efforts, discrimination against urban Aboriginal peoples persists" (McCaskill, 3). Perhaps even more telling are data highlighting the Aboriginal satisfaction with urban living. Despite the challenges of living in an environment made more difficult by racism and discrimination, the UAPS (2011) report found high levels of Aboriginal satisfaction with life in the city. This finding points to a timely need to improve the inclusiveness of urban places through engagement at the municipal level.

BIMAADIZIWIN IN THE CITY

Good public policy focuses on meeting need in areas like health, housing, education, and employment, to help people achieve their life aspirations in areas like culture and community, as well as fostering the development of positive social environments. Developing good public policy involves listening to, and engaging, those who are directly affected by the policy. Municipalities are the closest level of Canadian government to urban Aboriginal peoples, but, at the same time, are often the farthest away as Aboriginal peoples, par-

ticularly status Indians, are seen as the responsibility of the federal government. The Centre for Excellence in Municipal-Aboriginal Relations (since disbanded), established in 1996 by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Indian Taxation Advisory Board, and Indian Affairs and Northern Development, was seen as an exercise in inter-governmental relations (i.e. between First Nations reserve communities and municipalities, at the local level). It was designed to offer an approach that recognized, and indeed, mobilized, a range of stakeholders at different scales. However; the initiative neither included urban Aboriginal populations and their representative organizations among their partners, nor did it recognize the presence of urban Aboriginal communities.

Two decades later the situation is changing. Many municipalities have recognized the presence of urban Aboriginal communities, have developed political accords with urban Aboriginal representatives (e.g., Timmins, Saskatoon), and have turned their attention to issues of service delivery and access, education, community and neighborhood development, economic participation, prejudice, discrimination, and racism. In 2011, Statistics Canada reported that more than half of Canada's Aboriginal population now lives in cities and towns across the country. A century ago, only 8% resided in urban centres. This seemingly simple finding unmasks a complex lived reality that challenges Canadian perceptions of Aboriginal peoples as primarily rural or reserve-based. In the present day it is no longer accurate or acceptable to understand aboriginal communities through this historical lens. Another challenge facing municipal policy makers is a limited understanding of the realities of today's urban Aboriginal peoples and the desires they hold for their lives. At a conference on urban Aboriginal peoples in Thunder Bay in 2004, I had an opportunity to meet with a group of mayors from small towns in northwestern Ontario. The dominant sentiment, as expressed by one mayor, was "I want to do something but I don't know where to start." Since that time, municipal leaders have begun to educate themselves on Aboriginal issues, to develop positive working relationships with what are now permanent Aboriginal communities, and are starting to tackle, in partnership with Aboriginal organizations and leaders, the persistent problems of poverty, racism, and discrimination that are part of the contemporary urban Aboriginal landscape.

Aboriginal leaders have increasingly emerged as policy actors in urban environments, advocating effectively and vigo-rously on behalf of their communities. They struggle against the dominant and persistent paradigm of "the Indian problem[2]", which promotes the "exclusion of positive dimensions [with]…the effect of framing Aboriginal people as a problem people…" (Fleras 2005, 302). Many promising initiatives that challenge this paradigm are taking place in Canadian municipalities. For example, the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg has a policy objective of developing a self-sufficient, healthy and vibrant urban Aboriginal community[3] and grounds its work in the seven sacred teachings of the Anishinaabe. The Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council[4], composed of 20 local Aboriginal organizations, describes its members as "recognized for their leadership, accountability and ability to develop and deliver programs and services that are responsive to the unique needs and values of the urban Aboriginal community." Municipal governments have also established advisory councils like the twelve-member Urban Aboriginal Peoples Advisory Committee in Vancouver which has a mandate to provide advice and recommendations to Vancouver City Council[5] on issues of concern to Vancouver urban Aboriginal communities. Similarly, Aboriginal social service agencies in Toronto formed the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council[6] in 2009.

Urban Aboriginal peoples are pursuing what Anishinaabe thought calls "Bimaadiziwin" or "Mino-Bimaadiziwn": the good life. The "2011 Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study" identifies elements of "the good life" as including good education, good jobs, good family, good community, and the ability to live life as an Aboriginal person in a supportive and respectful environment[7]. Urban Aboriginal peoples also expressed a desire to shape their cities and towns so that they become more amicable living environments. A remarkable 71% of survey respondents indicated that they viewed the city as their home and, even though many (61%) had connections to rural or reserve environments, they had no intention of moving there.

Effective public policy recognizes the reality and goals of those it is intended to affect. The "Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" (Canada 1996, 383) reported that Aboriginal people living in urban environments see their cultural values, traditions, norms, and identities as important to their lives. Indeed it concluded that, "to cope in the urban milieu, support for enhancing and maintaining their cultural identity is essential. Whenever that support is absent, the urban experience is profoundly unhappy for Aboriginal peoples." The city is now home and urban Aboriginal peoples are setting out to shape it so that it can provide them with a good life. 61% of urban Aboriginal residents have a strong belief that they could make their city a better place to live. Since the 1950s, urban Aboriginal peoples have been developing a large, if somewhat fragile, infrastructure of organizations dedicated to urban Aboriginal life improvement. This invisible infrastructure (Newhouse 2003), comprising social service, housing, education, and cultural organizations, has become an important aspect of urban aboriginal life (The Report of the Toronto Aboriginal Research Project 2011).

TRACING THE IDENTITY OF URBAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN SCHOLARSHIP

The research and policy literature on urban Aboriginal peoples does not describe the realities of urban aboriginal peoples living in Canada today. It is a "study in lack." The idea

of lack, which has as its focus the shortcoming of individuals and communities, is an extremely powerful idea. The idea is captured in an undated consultation report of the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative which notes:

> *The four most common concerns for community and service providers were systemic discrimination, lack of community involvement in policy, programme planning and institutional change; lack of cross-cultural training; and lack of Aboriginal role models in all systems at all levels of service. (10)*

The executive summary is more direct in highlighting many of the shortcomings and challenges affecting urban Aboriginal communities in the justice system, but which can, in some cases, apply more generally:

> *The main issues or priorities discussed in the justice domain were the lack of Aboriginal staff in all areas of the justice system; lack of prevention, education, and support; lack of, or inflexible funding; warehousing of Aboriginal people in the prison system; lack of awareness/support re women; systemic discrimination; loss of Métis issues under the First Nations, Aboriginal umbrella; downloading to community without proper support/resources; … lack of attention to social precursors of crime (e.g., poverty, racism, addictions, etc.). (3)*

The idea of "lack", that Aboriginal peoples lacked the individual skills and community institutions necessary to live in urban environments, emerges in the work of early sociologists and anthropologists who examined the phenomenon of Aboriginal movement to cities and towns beginning in the 1950s. This migration, already well-known to Aboriginal peoples, led to the development of Indian Friendship Centres in several sites across the country: Toronto (1951), Vancouver (1952) and Winnipeg (1959). These centres served to facilitate adaptation to urban environments or, more precisely, focused upon the adaptation of Indian/Métis people to the Euro-Canadian urban environment. These early urban institutions focused on improving education and securing employment and housing for individuals who recently migrated to the city. While this project is an important one, it was based upon the notion that Indians did not possess the necessary skills and wherewithal to survive in urban environments. It was also motivated by a strong sense of compassion and desire to improve the quality of daily life for urban aboriginal peoples.

It is not surprising then to discover that the earliest studies [including *The Urban Dilemma* (Dosman, 1971) and *The Indian in the City* (Nagler 1970) focused on the social and economic status of Aboriginal people in the city and documented evidence of lack within this population. The texts *Reservation to City* (Neils 1971) and *Urban Indians: The Strangers in Canada's Cities* (Krotz 1980) continue these themes. In this literature, the urban landscape is presented as inhospitable to Indian people. It is a place where poverty abounds, where social disorder reigns, and where individuals live out a life, to use a phrase coined by Thomas Hobbes, that is "nasty, brutish, and short." While some aboriginal individuals survive and thrive in urban environments, they do so by leading middle-class lives and shedding many parts of their cultural identity. Conversely, those who do not are destined for difficult lives. It is, according to this literature, virtually impossible to embrace the urban and remain a healthy, well-functioning Aboriginal individual. To be fair, all four texts present some evidence of Aboriginal peoples who have successfully integrated into city life. These Aboriginal people live outside the main segments of Aboriginal communities and many express ambivalence about their Aboriginal identity. The theme of lack remains a dominant one in the social service literature that emerges from this era and continues, to some extent, until today. There are strong forces that make it difficult to resist characterizing the urban environment in this fashion: government funding is predicated on the notions of "problem and solution": the bigger the problem, the greater the amount of funding that might be available. With funding comes agencies/institutions and employment. While the original sense of lack was based upon the notion of "individual lack," it has been more recently seen as "community lack", as the urban aboriginal initiative consultation report above notes.

A shift in focus occurred in the mid 1970s with the investigation *Urban Renegades: The Cultural Strategy of American Indians* (Guillame 1975) of the Mi'kmaq (Micmac in her report) in Boston. Instead of focusing on lack, the author examined the way in which Mi'kmaq individuals were adapting to life in Boston and how they conceived of their lives as urban residents. The city, for many in her study, was not a site of loss but one of reinvention. Many felt no need to leave their Indianness behind or even their rural communities in Maine and Nova Scotia. The urban site was simply incorporated into their lives and a new urban Mi'kmaq culture emerged. Guillame also highlighted the importance of community as a central theme of urban Aboriginal life. Indians, she argues, are resilient and adaptable; they are simply adding the urban to their life experiences and creating an "urban Indian culture" out of Mi'kmaq and Bostonian cultures.

In his book *Urban Indians: The Strangers in Canadian Cities* (Krotz 1980) discusses an idea beginning to stir the imaginations of sociologists and anthropologists of his era: the emergence of a new ethnicity, the Urban Indian. In his words,

> *The urban Indian is identified not by his reserve affiliation or by his treaty status or by his socio-economic position. He or she is identified by ethnicity and heritage, even (or especially) while living in the city…. (an) identity forged by a combination of adherence to traditional values and a history of being outcasts from the larger society…. The native organizations, clubs, social*

> *centres… should not be seen, as temporary institutions meant simply to smooth the transition from reserve or rural area to city but as the beginning of a growing infrastructure for an Indian urban culture. (156)*

The text, *Indian Country, L.A.: Maintaining Ethnic Community in Complex Society* (Weibel-Orlando 1991) is a study of identity maintenance in which the development of community and its institutions are central. It documents the emergence of a Los Angeles Native American community over a twenty-year period. *Urban American Indian Identity in a US City: The Case of Chicago from the 1950s to the 1970s* (LaGrand 2003) does the same with a study of urban Indians in Chicago. In this work, the urban site is presented as a site of community; one of the central institutions in indigenous social thought. The urban and the rural are conceived as intertwined in complex ways.

While there are challenges, the urban should not be inconsistent with our notions of aboriginality. Indeed, "The Urban Tradition among Native Americans" (Forbes 2001) in Lobo and Peters (2001) constructs a history of the urban in aboriginal North America. He argues that there were large urban centres in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans and that our notions of the urban, based to a large extent upon European/North American notions of "city," ought to be rethought to include indigenous ones. The urban in aboriginal history has been systematically erased by mainstream anthropologists and historians because it would support the idea of "aboriginal civilization," a notion that would have been inconsistent with European thought at the time. The "Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" (1996) picks up the notion of an urban community in its final report. The urban environment, in the findings of the RCAP, has become a site of established, long standing urban aboriginal communities, essential to the maintenance of aboriginal identities.

The latest research refutes the notion that being urban is inconsistent with being Aboriginal. The urban environment is seen as a place where Aboriginal people can live good lives as Aboriginal peoples, provided there is a strong community that supports the core elements of urban aboriginal identity: spirituality, language, land base, values and tradition, family, and ceremonial life (Canada 1996, 533).

RECLAIMING URBAN ABORIGINAL HISTORIES

The movement of Aboriginal peoples to cities was first brought to public attention through the "Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada," commonly known as the Hawthorn Report (1966), as well as the early investigations of anthropologists and sociologists. The encounter with the urban was seen as unkind to Aboriginal peoples and, in some sense, inconsistent with commonly held notions about Aboriginal identities and life. A half-century later, the idea of urban is no longer inconsistent with the idea of Aboriginal. The RCAP final report (1996, 521) argues that Aboriginal peoples and their communities are important to the health and vibrancy of Canadian cities. Hawthorne (1966, 10) states, "The Indian does not come empty handed to the modern situation." Echoing this observation, Newhouse and Peters (2003, 5) remark in *Not Strangers in These Parts* that "city life is now an integral component of Aboriginal peoples' lives in Canada."

This history is presented because it challenges our understandings of urban Aboriginal peoples and provides a different foundation for the work of public policy makers. Aboriginal peoples have been part of urban communities since the 1950s and according to recent scholarship, were integral to cities like Victoria (Edmonds 2010). Urban Aboriginal lives today continue to be dominated by the colonial legacy of poverty, dispossession, and exclusion. Although they are not lives of desperation and disconnection, but predicated on the pursuit of Bimaadiziwin. Here is the important point: urban Aboriginal peoples are peoples with urban histories. They are peoples who are fully engaged in living in cities and are confident they can shape aspects of the city to create good urban Aboriginal lives. They also believe that cities ought to be diverse: 77% of urban Aboriginal residents in contrast to 54% of non-Aboriginal urban residents believe that cities have room for a wide variety of languages and cultures (UAPS 2011). These high rates of acceptance exist despite the consistent, almost universal (90%), encounter with negative attitudes and behaviors towards them.

WHAT CAN MUNICIPAL LEADERS DO?

Given the potential and desire of aboriginal communities to help shape cities into places where everyone can live a good life, it is critical that connections be made between aboriginal and non-aboriginal actors. There are a number of actions that municipal leaders can take to improve relationships with urban Aboriginal peoples and assist in the improvement of their quality of life.

- Engage the local urban Aboriginal leadership in a collective fashion through Aboriginal circles, councils, and commissions for the development of local municipal policies. This engagement should also include the appointment, with the advice of Aboriginal community representatives, of Aboriginal community members to municipal governance activities. The initiative should supplement efforts to develop good relationships with local First Nations and Métis communities;

- Develop effective working relationships with local urban Aboriginal organizations on issues of common

concern: housing, education, community safety, economic participation, and cultural development;

• Consider the development of an urban Aboriginal strategy for the municipality and a formal accord that recognizes the presence of urban Aboriginal peoples and communities and proposes ways of working together. Remember that the city is home for urban Aboriginal peoples, often built upon historic Aboriginal gathering places;

• Gather and promote the use of wise practices to assist small- and medium-sized municipalities to create relationships, develop policies and programs, and improve cooperative efforts with local Aboriginal communities;

• Foster Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal collaborative learning efforts through public education, anti-racism/diversity training, and anti-racism groups consisting of a diverse set of people. This learning should include discussions of the effect that discrimination has upon the lives of Aboriginal peoples;

• Celebrate and make visible the cultural presence of Aboriginal peoples in the ceremonial and cultural life of the municipality.

NOTES

[1] The study drew from a representative sample of 2600 Aboriginal individuals.

[2] Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs in a 1920 appearance before the Standing Committee on Indian Affair described the Canadian governments policy objective as to 'get rid of the Indian problem… Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian Question and no Indian Department.' (DCS 1920, HC Special Committee)

[3] For more information on Winnipeg's Aboriginal Council please visit: www.aboriginalcouncil.org

[4] For more information on Metro Vancouver's Aboriginal Executive Council please visit: www.mvaec.ca

[5] For more information on what's going on at the City of Vancouver please visit: www.vancouver.ca

[6] For more information on the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council please visit: www.TASSC.ca

[7] For more information on the 2011 Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study please visit: www.uaps.ca

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