JOURNEYS OF A GENERATION: BROADENING THE ABORIGINAL WELL-BEING POLICY RESEARCH AGENDA

Dan Beavon is the Director of the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. He is also an Adjunct Research Professor in Sociology at the University of Western Ontario. Dan is the winner of the 2008 Gold Medal Award that is awarded each year to only one government scientist by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada: this award acknowledges recipients' outstanding scientific work and the contribution of that work to the improvement and enhancement of public well-being. / **Daniel Jetté** is a Strategic Research Manager with the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

On behalf of our colleagues in the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and our partners at the Association for Canadian Studies, we are pleased to welcome you to this special, Aboriginal-themed edition of *Canadian Issues.*

We are particularly pleased to be able to partner with the Association for Canadian Studies for not one, but two publications dedicated solely to Aboriginal policy research. Work is currently underway for a special edition of the association's *Canadian Diversity* journal. That volume, which is scheduled for release in late 2009, will feature works highlighting the diversity of Canada's First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples through geographic, cultural and socioeconomic lenses.

Four decades after the 1969 *White Paper on Indian Policy,* and over a decade since the release of the *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,* old preconceptions and incomplete understandings about Aboriginal rights, peoples and communities continue to inhibit effective policy deliberations, and contribute to misinformed public discourse on Aboriginal issues. It is our belief that sound policy research, along with open discussion and debate of inherently diverse and complex issues, will lead to better public policy; further, it will enhance the public's understanding of important issues, create healthier relationships amongst different ethnic groups, and strengthen our pluralistic and democratic institutions. This belief drives virtually all of our work and will be the ethic that informs the special *Canadian Diversity* edition.

The objective of this volume, however, as indicated by the title, is more focused. Through such works as the adaptation of the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), as well as the Community Well-being Index (CWB), the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has been a pioneer in advancing the state of knowledge regarding the quality of life of Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. These initiatives, along with our partnerships with leading Canadian and international researchers, our collaborations with Aboriginal organizations, and our work with the University of Western Ontario and the National Association of Friendship Centres on the 2002, 2006 and 2009 Aboriginal Policy Research Conferences, have all been undertaken with one goal in mind: improving the foundation of knowledge about Canada's Aboriginal peoples so that federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal policymakers are better equipped to make meaningful improvements to the matrix of policies and programs that affect Aboriginal well-being.

And yet, it would be an overstatement to suggest that the work of achieving a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Aboriginal well-being is complete. While efforts to maximize the analytical potential of the HDI and CWB continue, we are mindful of their limitations, particularly their emphasis on relatively basic measures of health and socioeconomic well-being. While these tools have been helpful in documenting the extent of the socioeconomic disadvantage affecting Canada's Aboriginal

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peoples and in informing the setting of priorities for policy discussions, a broader approach to understanding the drivers of both individual and community well-being ultimately are required.

It is for that reason that we lead off this journal with an article discussing the utility of the lifecourse approach for analyzing factors that affect quality of life. As Cooke observes, an approach that calls on researchers to consider the implications for well-being of transitions and events at all stages of life may be particularly beneficial to better understanding drivers of Aboriginal well-being. First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples living in different communities or cultural contexts inevitably experience life paths that are markedly different from those of non-Aboriginal people, meaning that individual factors that contribute to the accumulated deficits, in terms of Aboriginal well-being, should be identifiable, measurable and – with the appropriate policy mix – preventable. In the same spirit, Guimond and Clatworthy demonstrate how sound analysis of demographic trends contributes to the formulation of policies that address Aboriginal well-being. We are also treated to a series of analytical snapshots analyses of Aboriginal demographic and socioeconomic data from the 2006 Census, as prepared by Steffler and Street, both of INAC's Socio-economic and Demographic Statistics Section.

The next set of articles latches onto the lifecourse theme, analyzing the well-being implications of issues that manifest themselves at birth (Mann; Eni et. al), and during early childhood (Ball) and young adulthood (Aman; Matthew; and Hull). As youth mature and become increasingly immersed in the social, cultural and economic realities that surround them, Jedwab, Fonda and Richmond show how the role of community networks and cultural institutions in promoting well-being should not be neglected by researchers genuinely interested in contributing to improvement of Aboriginal peoples' quality of life.

We conclude with a series of papers discussing alternative approaches to analyzing the well-being of Aboriginal peoples and communities. Lapointe et. al utilize the CWB framework to pioneer a detailed analysis of Métis communities. Liodakis takes a creative approach, employing a class structural analysis framework to underscore the extent of inequality both *between* Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and *within* First Nation, Inuit and Métis populations. Waslander turns to Statistics Canada's Statistical Area Classification framework to analyze the relationship between the level of economic integration between urban centres and adjacent First Nation communities, and the socioeconomic outcomes observed in those communities. Finally, Fonda and Anderson take us on a trip to the Northwest Territories, where First Nations involved in the diamond industry are testing alternative approaches to tracking the impacts of resource exploration on the well-being of these communities.

As we write these words, in December 2008, governments around the world, including our own, are attempting to grapple with the onset of the most significant global economic disturbance in half a century. It is almost universally understood that, with international efforts focussed squarely on the stabilization of the global economy, policymakers whose work is not directly related to that urgent effort can expect to be asked to do more with less. In this context, some will inevitably argue, academic-level discussions and research about drivers of Aboriginal well-being are luxuries that we cannot afford.

We would argue that the opposite is true, that this is *precisely* the time to be renewing and strengthening our collective commitment to evidence-based policy development. In times of fiscal restraint, policymakers should be more concerned than ever with finding new ways to achieve maximum benefit from minimum investment. When the buffalo herd is on the move, it's usually not a good time to be standing still.

With that tortured metaphor mercifully behind us, we invite you to turn the page and join us in asking important questions about how best to ensure the next generation of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples have every opportunity to improve their well-being and that of their families and communities, at every point along their individual and collective journeys.