

***Lessons from Abroad:
Towards a New Social Model for Canada's
Aboriginal Peoples***

by

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This paper compares the welfare conditions, policy challenges and opportunities for Aboriginal peoples in the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Our objective is to point to some of the common challenges facing Aboriginal social policies in different countries. What can we learn from experiences elsewhere to build Canada's social knowledge as it relates to Aboriginal peoples?

Despite important differences in the institutional underpinnings of their relationship with the state, Aboriginal peoples in all three countries share common socio-economic challenges:

- A growing and increasingly young population living in environments (urban or rural) that are not conducive to healthy development and inclusion in the job market;
- Increasing urbanization, which, combined with high poverty rates, low levels of educational attainment and poor health, exacerbates the risk of social exclusion;
- Problems of access to basic services in remote communities where a significant number of Aboriginal people still live; and
- High degrees of dependence on state programs for income, and limited opportunity for community-based income sources.

There are common policy responses to the challenges of Aboriginal welfare in the countries we compared but also important differences. All share with Canada a history of paternalistic and disempowering policies that created a high level of dependency on the state but also a high level of mistrust towards that same state within Aboriginal communities. A move away from such policies, towards greater integration of Aboriginal programming into mainstream departments, coupled with increased decentralization of program management, is common to all countries. This transformation must be situated within the context of recent changes in the overall direction of welfare policies towards a focus on individual self-reliance and market-based solutions.

The impact of such reforms varies considerably however across countries, mainly as a consequence of the legal and political nature of the relationship between the state and Aboriginal peoples. The presence of treaties in the United States and New Zealand provides strong grounds for Aboriginal claims to legal entitlement to state support and differentiated treatment. In Australia, where there are no treaties to be recognized, social policies are still largely conceived first as a means to "catch up" to the rest of the population rather than a recognition of historical entitlement. Interestingly, Australian Aboriginal peoples fare worse than their American, New Zealand and Canadian counterparts on most socio-economic indicators.

In line with the overall focus of governments on decentralization, the retreat from entitlement-based and Aboriginal-specific programs was coupled with increased possibilities for local input in program management and, as a result, greater diversity in the ways policies are implemented in Aboriginal communities. In some cases, this opened space for greater *de facto* autonomy for Aboriginal authorities now in charge of such programs. This is mostly true in the United States,

where tribal governments have had greater institutional capacity. The paradoxical connection between mainstreaming and greater autonomy, more than the specifics of policies, is perhaps the most significant finding of our study.

There might in fact be a timely intersection between the restructuring of post-war social architectures, with policies increasingly aimed at enabling citizens rather than protecting them from market failures, and the overall transformations in Aboriginal-state relations. While past social programs were to a large extent aimed at compensating for Aboriginal lack of economic autonomy, today's Aboriginal welfare mix in many countries is focused on facilitating and supporting this autonomy, in various forms.

For Aboriginal peoples to capitalize on this decentralization process however, certain conditions must be met. The comparative experience of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia is useful in understanding the challenges that lie ahead in policy terms. It is when devolution comes with a commitment to and support for substantive political autonomy and capacity building that the objectives of greater self-reliance and the reshaping of Aboriginal peoples' welfare away from state dependency seem to be most successful.