

***Urgent Need, Serious Opportunity:  
Towards a New Social Model for Canada's  
Aboriginal Peoples***

**by**

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**Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

The social welfare of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has been affected by the same large processes of change as that of other Canadians: restructured labour markets, widening income inequality, evolving educational needs, and changing demography. Aboriginal people have the same interest as other citizens in developing a just, secure and inclusive social architecture. But Aboriginal people come to these questions from a different place: both their historical experience and their current position are distinctive.

The elaboration of proposals for a new social architecture for Canada presents a remarkable opportunity for some of the most basic institutions in Canadian society to “catch up” to the dramatic changes in the legal, political and demographic circumstances of Aboriginal peoples in Canada that have marked the last three decades. The political changes of the last forty years have created a new and more favourable basis for policies and programs meant to address the urgent needs of Aboriginal people. Despite some real progress, though, the situations of Aboriginal people as members of the Canadian community are still, on the whole, characterized by unacceptable levels of inequality and disadvantage that bear especially harshly on children and families. There is urgent need, in many areas.

With the hope of encouraging further discussion, this report highlights some of the key issues that arise in considering the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people in the development of a new social architecture for Canada. It aims to provide empirical information and some pointed questions, to support the discussion among Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canada of their common future. The analysis attempts to respect the diversity of circumstances and interests of First Nations, Metis and Inuit across Canada. It recognizes that for Aboriginal peoples, as for other citizens of Canada, there is a tension between universality and uniformity of benefit, on the one hand, and respect for particular needs and qualities of individuals and groups on the other. To these are added the complex task of reforming the system away from colonial practices while coping with the present-day consequences of colonialism. The tensions inherent in this process intensify and occasionally confuse the “normal” tensions arising from other sources.

Data is presented to show that Aboriginal peoples as a group, and especially Aboriginal youth as a group, are a rapidly growing proportion of the population who, increasingly, live in small and large Canadian cities. Though there has been some progress on several indicators of social well-being, there are still urgent needs and unacceptable disparities in the circumstances of most Aboriginal people and the rest of the Canadian population.

Key changes in the last fifty years of Aboriginal-Canada relations are reviewed, by exposing some of the roots of present inequalities and, at the same time, by showing how the new and more favourable circumstances for policy development in this field have emerged. With the recognition of the inherent right of self-government and the fundamental importance of the Treaties has come a new framework for change. The paper reviews very generally the major forms of social provision for Aboriginal people, concluding that it is evident that there has been significant “policy learning” in most areas, and some interesting new approaches are being tried. The situation is fluid, and characterized by different models that follow contrasting policy logics.

The “policy models” that characterize the present situation are described, policy rationales are identified and, in conclusion, some areas of priority need and opportunity are highlighted.