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CityScapes Roundtable

“Approaches to Current Challenges Facing Urban Aboriginal Peoples”

**Notes on a seminar presentation by
Wayne Helgason
President, Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg**

**234 Laurier Street, Ottawa
December 9, 2002¹**

The fourth session of CityScapes Roundtable Program featured Wayne Helgason, Executive Director of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, and President of the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg. He discussed what it means to be an urban Aboriginal person, and presented some ideas on the governance mechanisms that do and do not work in the urban setting. In the discussion that followed, participants looked at the role of youth, debated how the federal government can help move the Aboriginal agenda forward and considered what it means for a culture to evolve.

Wayne Helgason is the Executive Director of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, and President of the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg. He is also involved with a wide range of other organisations that promote Aboriginal peoples or strive to strengthen communities, such as the National Association of Friendship Centres and the Canadian Council on Social Development. He graduated from Carleton University in 1973, has studied at Harvard, and lectured at the University of Toronto and the Banff School of Management. From this perspective, Mr. Helgason spoke on the challenges currently facing urban Aboriginal peoples, and some potential ways of approaching these dilemmas.

Synopsis of Wayne Helgason’s Presentation

When Wayne Helgason's mother, Irene, returned from residential school, the local Indian agent at Sandy Bay found her a position as a housekeeper in a nearby Icelandic community. His father was the nephew of the woman Irene worked for. Mr. Helgason grew up in the Icelandic

¹ In attendance: Fred Caron, Nathalie Des Rosiers, Jeanne Flemming, Luc Goudreault, Mark Holzman, Allan MacDonald, Alfred MacLeod, Adam Ostry, Susan Scotti, Lyn Elliot Sherwood, Jean-Pierre Voyer, Brian Ward; Heather Edwards, John Graham, Claire Marshall.

community for the first eight years of his life, but was also in close contact with the Ojibway reserve. Even as a child, he could sense a difference between the two communities; both were poor, but the Icelandic immigrants had more social activity and better networks. The Ojibway of Sandy Bay had not yet developed the social capital or cohesion that the Icelandic community drew its strength from.

Helping Aboriginal communities build strong communities is now an important goal for Mr. Helgason. He works in Winnipeg with different Aboriginal groups, and pays special attention to child welfare and inner city problems. Interacting with urban Aboriginal peoples has shown Wayne how they too are searching to find themselves, and especially within a community.

Urban Aboriginal peoples can be found across Canada, but Winnipeg has the distinction of having the largest Aboriginal population: 45 000 to 55 000. They have been developing a community and organising themselves since the 1950s, initiating such ideas as the Aboriginal Council² and the Friendship Centre³ movement. There are now a wide range of infrastructure and support mechanisms developed by Aboriginal people in Winnipeg.

In order to develop this infrastructure, the various different Aboriginal groups in the city decided to work together to provide themselves with what they needed. For example, they came together ten years ago to buy the old CP Centre so that they would have a place from which to work.⁴ They established the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg as a central point for urban Aboriginal people in Winnipeg. This type of initiative is necessary because while urban Aboriginal people are highly *represented* by Chiefs, MPs, MLAs, AFN, CAP or other groups, they are some of the least *governed* people. The federal and provincial governments pass responsibility back and forth, and the city has very few resources at its disposal. The Chiefs meanwhile, are mostly concerned with affairs on reserve. While organisations like CAP and AFN have an important role, they are more the product of their funding than of popular support. Further, at every level policy processes appear so bogged-down in theories and procedures that they cannot take action to deal with a situation that is in front of them. Thus, urban Aboriginal people in Winnipeg have left the political issues to these “representative” groups and have turned to their own organisations and to others like the Social Planning Council⁵ for practical solutions for immediate problems.

Unfortunately, there are a large number of problems, many of which are linked to poor education. 51% of Aboriginal 18-24 year olds in Winnipeg have not completed high school, as opposed to 20% for all Winnipeggers in this age range. Most of the young people -- the ones who

² The Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg was founded in 1990 with the union of the Urban Indian Association and the Winnipeg Council of Treaty and Status Indians. Its mission is to act as an effective voice of the Aboriginal community of Winnipeg.

³ The Friendship Centre movement began in the 1950s as groups formed in urban areas to help link urban Aboriginal people with established social services. There are now 99 centres across Canada which aim to promote Aboriginal culture in their communities and provide services to Aboriginal peoples. Since 1972, the Federal government has provided funding for the Friendship Centres.

⁴ The old CP building is now known as the Aboriginal Centre, and houses a variety of Aboriginal organisations including the Aboriginal Council.

⁵ The Social Planning Council is a voluntary sector group that serves as a link between governments and citizens. It includes Aboriginal members.

will need to take up leadership roles in the future -- are at a grade 5 or 6 level. This is linked to the fact that Aboriginal people in Winnipeg are three times more transient than their non-Aboriginal neighbours, and 61% of urban Aboriginal families in Manitoba are single parent families. Yet there are some signs of hope. The Aboriginal Centre graduates about 500 students a year. The *Head Start* program has been very successful, especially because it links together education, community support, and respect for culture and family. With initiatives like these, Mr. Helgason thinks the education of urban Aboriginal peoples can be brought up to the level of the city average within 20 years.

Another sign of hope is the positive results often experienced when the local community takes control of direction and resources. Unfortunately, acquiring local control of resources has been a challenge. Typically, funds flow from the government to the Chiefs to on-reserve populations, leaving out urban Aboriginal peoples. When these urban people are included, it is often in flawed programs where the authority that applies the funds (Chief and council) is not responsible to the community affected and has no knowledge of their place of residence. Recent court decisions have recognised the flaw in this scenario, and Mr. Helgason is hopeful that this will mean more effective local control in the future.

Mr. Helgason's observations and experience have led him to conclude that in order to deal with the problems faced by the community, the community members must recognise each other and focus on what practical steps they can take to address the problems. In other words, there needs to be community building and a focus on action. Partnering with mainstream organisations can be a very positive step along this route, especially where First Nations lack skills, knowledge or resources. The key is to keep the community at the centre of any endeavour.

The federal government needs to look carefully at its approach to urban Aboriginal peoples -- and take leadership. This means focusing on the future, active partnership, and inclusive approaches that acknowledge the wide range of organisations that Aboriginal people participate in, from Band Council, to women's circles, to political groups, to youth clubs, to volunteer organisations. It may also mean paying attention to 1872 treaties promising each Band member a sum of money equivalent to the cost of 5 acres of land.

Aboriginal peoples, urban or otherwise, can be seen as either a tremendous resource to encourage or a tremendous challenge to overcome. In order to achieve the former, it is necessary to shift away from a paradigm of assistance and towards one of active participation.

Respondant

The respondent highlighted two conceptual shifts that seem to be reflected by the experience of urban Aboriginal people: territoriality and identity, and community and governance.

Around the world, territoriality seems to be disappearing as a way of understanding identity. Many communities, Aboriginal and otherwise, are showing resilience in continuing to be strong and moving forward despite the loss of lands. This is not to say that land is no longer important, but that it is possible to be a community without being attached to a geographic location. It is no longer clear *how* place is important, or on how place and governance are linked.

Similarly, the link between official governance mechanisms and the communities where action is needed is not always clear. For example, the government may only hear the community members who speak the government's "language", and thus receive a distorted impression of the group. Another illustration is that for a community to get funding, it needs to promise measurable results, but its primary objective may not be evident for 20 years. As a result, the primary objective may be forgotten in the midst of easily measurable intermediate results. The challenge for governments is to put trust in local communities to do what is right for them, and to find ways to cope with the associated risk.

Discussion

The chair initiated the discussion by highlighting three key points made by Wayne Helgason:

- There are many programs run by Aboriginal people in urban areas. Aboriginal service organisations are doing very good work in this area.
- Aboriginal people face a constitutional maze when it comes to dealing with any government. The federal government should step up and take leadership regarding urban Aboriginal people.
- Aboriginal representative organisations do not work in an urban setting, to the detriment of urban Aboriginal people.

Youth

Youth are a source of hope in urban Aboriginal communities. They have not experienced as many limitations as older generations, and thus bring positive and optimistic perspectives to the community. They are educated, they want to be inclusive, they have not been habituated into "us versus them", they still believe that confrontation is not the only way to proceed, and they are willing to see if Aboriginal people might be able to get a better deal by working together. The Friendship Centres actively engage the community's youth, ensuring that they get a third of delegate voting. Thus, by including Friendship Centres in Aboriginal forums and initiatives, other Aboriginal organisations and government departments will also be including the fresh and optimistic attitude of youth.

Given the importance of youth, one thing that the federal government could help with is education. Mr. Helgason sees a need for an education strategy that embraces all Aboriginal people, be they Métis, First Nation or other. This strategy would have to recognise the importance of community and provide positive reinforcement of the community so that children grow up proud of their ancestry.

Diversity and Leadership

Additional areas where Mr. Helgason would like to see the federal government step up and take responsibility include:

- thinking about what the treaties meant – and how the meaning might be translated from the 1800's into the 2000's.
- improve the delivery of the national child benefit

- ensuring that funding gets to individuals, rather than being lost in substructures
- improving the welfare delivery system

Roundtable participants see two types of obstacles that impede the federal government from addressing the issues Mr. Helgason identified. First, they are wary of the cost. Second, they hear a wide variety of recommendations of how to proceed from the various different Aboriginal groups. This diversity of voices makes it hard to enable a bottom-up approach.

The costs may well be high, but the government is in fact paying for it already, in litigation, in incarceration, in health care, etc. There is definitely a cost to taking action, but there is also a cost to inaction. Where would you rather spend the money? The government needs to find a way to look beyond daunting short-term costs and see the potential of long-term investment.

Diversity of voices is a fact of life, not just for Aboriginal peoples, but for everyone. Consider the range of opinions expressed by the different federal government departments – is it any wonder different Aboriginal groups also have different ideas? Yet it is possible for the groups to come together and take action, as illustrated by the groups that worked together to buy the building that houses the Aboriginal Centre.

One option for the federal government is to start working with those groups that can get the job done, and those that are not yet ready to take on such responsibilities can have the funding they might have received put in escrow. This would acknowledge that it is acceptable to have a period of disorder, and would remove some of the pressure for the minority group to pull itself together. This is especially relevant to the urban setting where the community is not yet well enough developed to have a single spokesperson.

Cultural Evolution

The reserve is currently the centre of most Aboriginal programming, but urbanisation is a growing phenomena. This makes for a tension between the urban community and the reserve. How this is resolved will affect the evolution of Aboriginal culture. In the past, people could change what chief they followed, and many bands moved location with the seasons. These practices may tell us something about what it means to be part of a culture; it's about a sense of belonging and pride more than attachment to a specific piece of land. Can this be translated into the present and help Aboriginal peoples understand how urban culture fits into their way of life?

Moving forward might mean including Aboriginal elements in mainstream governance systems. For example, having a designated Aboriginal city councillor, or figuring out how integrate an urban reserve with existing municipal structures.

Constitutional Recognition and Immediate Needs

There are two very different approaches towards Aboriginal issues. On the one hand, everything can be brought back to treaties and the constitution, and the central question is whose obligation is this? On the other hand, issues can be approached as a matter of needs, in which case the central question is who needs what services? The Aboriginal Council has taken the second

approach. It will respect everyone's nation-building aspirations, but it focuses on providing support and services to create healthy individuals. The premise is that a healthy person is better able to participate in his or her community.

While it is important to deal with constitutional issues, there are some dangers in pursuing that approach. One is that seeking constitutional recognition will result in the neglect of other things of importance to the community. In the worst case scenario, the community will fall apart because its immediate needs are not met. Another danger is that as the Aboriginal community invests energy in constitutional issues, it will invest the constitution with symbolic value. This is not in and of itself negative, but it will make negotiations more difficult because it is a different view of the constitution than that espoused by the general Canadian public. Canadians generally see functional value in the constitution (things are in the constitution because they are good), not symbolic (items are good because they are in the constitution).