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Exposing the aboriginal industry

Canada spends billions on its native people, yet many aboriginals remain plagued by poverty, addiction and other social ills. Meanwhile, a handful of lawyers, band leaders and chiefs prosper, argue the authors of a controversial new book

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CALGARY—One of the most pressing problems in Canada today is the terrible social conditions that exist in many aboriginal communities. It is well known that the rates of poverty, substance abuse and violence are much higher for the native population, and that health and educational levels remain far below the national average. Even more disturbing is the fact that the alarming statistics persist despite billions of dollars being spent on programs and services to alleviate these Third World conditions. Why has so much government funding had so little impact?



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

A boy walks down a gravel road in Northern Ontario's Kashechewan reserve, where residents were evacuated in 2005 due to the presence of E. Coli in the water supply. (Oct. 27, 2005)

Fifteen years ago we decided to try to provide some answers to these perplexing questions. The result is *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*, a book that combines our own experiences with 10 years of additional research to investigate all aspects of aboriginal policy. It shows that the reason for the massive policy failure is that current initiatives are being formulated and implemented by a self-serving "industry" that works behind the scenes in aboriginal organizations.

Legal firms masterminding the residential schools settlement and anthropologists directing "traditional knowledge" studies, for example, have received hundreds of millions of dollars over the years. Some in this group of non-aboriginal lawyers and consultants have little incentive to solve aboriginal problems because they thrive on the continuation of aboriginal dependency and social dysfunction. The reality of the aboriginal industry is that grievances result in the dispersal of government funds, and so its members benefit from perpetuating, rather than alleviating, aboriginal deprivation.

The aboriginal industry maintains this state of affairs, in part, by advocating cultural traditionalism in the native population. No rational person believes that modern problems can be

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solved by reverting to the ways of our ancestors, as is assumed in aboriginal policy development. This does not mean that we are prevented from appreciating historical accomplishments, only that we are not obligated to accept all past beliefs and practices under the guise of "preserving our culture." Valuing the plays of Shakespeare, for example, does not mean that we have to embrace the Divine Right of Kings, blood-letting or burning witches at the stake.

Aboriginal cultural features, however, are perceived as inexorable. It is assumed, for example, that since aboriginal peoples were once hunters and gatherers, they should continue to hunt and trap and gather berries so as to preserve their "spiritual relationship" to the land. Aboriginal languages that are spoken by only a few hundred people should be taught in the elementary grades, we are told, so that aboriginal "worldviews" can continue to find expression. This is not to deny that aboriginal people, like all Canadians, should have the right to pursue the beliefs and cultural practices that give them satisfaction; it is only to stress that this is a choice for individuals to make. The idea that aboriginal peoples are natural hunters, or that they have a predetermined spirituality, is actually a form of racial stereotyping that constrains future possibilities. Aboriginal people, like all other Canadians, can think for themselves.

Unproductive economic practices, tribal forms of political organization, superstitious "healing" initiatives, pre-literate languages and unscientific forms of "knowledge" are also encouraged because of the condescending assumption that this will raise aboriginal self-esteem and give native people the confidence to participate in modern society. But such initiatives will not provide aboriginal people with the skills, knowledge and discipline needed to participate in a wide range of socially necessary occupations. "Native studies" programs in Canadian universities, for example, teach that the myth that aboriginal peoples were placed in North America/Turtle Island by "the Creator" is just as valid as scientific theories about human migrations out of Africa. But if aboriginal people are not encouraged to approach this myth critically, as occurs with respect to, say, Christian myths such as Genesis, how will aboriginal people become contributors to the fields of archaeology, palæontology and biology? The blanket promotion of aboriginal "worldviews" and "ways of life," therefore, can rationalize aboriginal isolation.

Recognizing the need for aboriginal people to participate in Canadian society, instead of being warehoused on unviable reserves, does not constitute a proposal for "assimilation." Rather, it is a plea for integration whereby many aspects of aboriginal culture – humour, artistic sensibilities, noncoercive forms of child rearing and so on – will become part of the wider culture. At the same time, however, integration recognizes that certain aspects of aboriginal culture are inhibiting aboriginal survival today, and these characteristics, as well as unviable aboriginal reserves and remote communities, should be allowed to gradually "wither away" according to the decline in their expedience.

The aboriginal industry, however, favours segregation over integration. In order to prevent the recognition of this socially destructive policy direction, the aboriginal industry has developed some very effective tactics over the last 40 years. It viciously attacks the credibility of opponents, arguing that criticism of aboriginal policy is to denigrate aboriginal people themselves. "Racist," "colonialist," and "right-wing" are the most common insults hurled at those who dare to question the viability and effectiveness of land claims and self-government initiatives. Recently, organizations like the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs have even argued that critics like us are guilty of "inciting hate," and some members of the Canadian Political Science Association have asked if we should be charged under the Criminal Code. As a result of these tactics, most people who are uncomfortable with the obviously unworkable and irrational character of aboriginal policy are discouraged from raising their concerns publicly.

Because the negotiation of land claims and self-government agreements occurs behind closed doors or in remote areas of Canada, most people are unaware of the machinations driving current aboriginal policy initiatives. They assume that because a number of aboriginal leaders are

supportive of the existing policy direction, this must be what most aboriginal people "want." These leaders have been corrupted by the financial rewards offered by the aboriginal industry, and therefore are completely unrepresentative of the interests of "their people." In fact, these leaders remain in positions of power because of native segregation and marginalization.

Many native leaders are anxious to build an "economic base" in their unviable communities because the aboriginal industry ensures that the leadership will profit from these initiatives. Native leaders obtain a range of benefits, from "honoraria" to sinecures as members on the boards of the organizations that are set up to administer the transfers of funds and provision of services. The aboriginal industry also needs the leadership to legitimate its proposals and ensure that community members are brought on side. The latter acquiesce under the misguided assumption that they will benefit.

The fundamental needs of indigenous people are common to everyone in the modern period: education, health care and housing. Provision of these services should be considered an obligation of the state and delivered with the consideration of the specific needs of aboriginal people. Although this proposal for reasserting government control over the delivery of programs and services to the native population will be interpreted by some as "colonialism," no advocate for social justice is opposed to publicly funded education or health care for other Canadian citizens. In fact, the opposition is to offloading and contracting out – a circumstance that comes very close to what is actually occurring in aboriginal communities, with the resulting poor quality of care and low educational standards.

It is necessary for the current forms of cultural indoctrination that pass for education in native communities to be replaced by programs designed to address the failure of the system to provide education at the level enjoyed by all other Canadians. This has occurred, for instance, at the Grandview/Uuquinak'uuh Elementary School in East Vancouver, where dramatic improvements in educational achievement have been made, not by instituting "culturally sensitive" programs, but through a focus on literacy, academics and objective assessments. Health care should also be provided at the high scientific standard received by the non-native population. While housing in Canada is generated in the private sector according to profit motivation, native community housing is government funded. However, the delivery is through housing boards which have, as their primary function, native board control. This means that traditional customs determine distribution of housing and leadership administers building contracts. The result is that relatives and favoured friends are allocated houses before those in direct need and building contracts are awarded to native shadow companies that profit by sub-contracting to outside construction firms. These firms are then held up as examples of "successful" aboriginal businesses.

Exposing these deplorable circumstances in *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* has resulted in a polarized reaction. Some have heralded it as a courageous and truthful book, while others have either misrepresented its contents or attacked us personally. Although responding to the personal attacks has been an emotional strain and the "hate crime" allegation is disconcerting, we have come to realize that this is an inevitable process that we have to go through in order for real debate to take place about aboriginal policy in this country. Intimidation and smear tactics may have worked in the past, but they are beginning to wear thin. Now that it has been exposed that the Emperor has no clothes, his nudity cannot be denied indefinitely.

Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation is published by McGill-Queen's University Press. Frances Widdowson is a faculty member at Mount Royal College. Albert Howard has worked as a consultant for government and native groups. The Donner Prize rewards the best public policy thinking, writing and research in Canada. This year's winner will be announced in Toronto next Thursday. For a list of nominees see donnerbookprize.com.