



# **Aboriginal Relations and Policy in Australia and Canada: From Handout to Hand-Up**

**By Tahlia Maslin**



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The Australian referendum of 1967 approved amendments to the Australian Constitution which allowed the Federal Government to make special laws that applied to Aboriginal Australians. As a result, since 1967, Australian governments have put in place policies and programs with the aim of achieving positive social and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people. However, over four decades later, the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is still unacceptably wide. In fact, some studies suggest the gap is actually widening.<sup>1</sup>

Canada faces similar issues in closing the gap between their indigenous and non-indigenous citizens. While Canada and Australia both enjoy a high ranking on the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI)—8<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> respectively—their indigenous people are considerably worse off, comparatively sitting at 32<sup>nd</sup> and 103<sup>rd</sup>. This situation of Aboriginal people living in Third World conditions highlights the need for urgent action in both countries.

An overview of the history of Aboriginal policy and relations in Australia in comparison to Canada provides a useful context for policymakers in both countries. Some of the negative experiences in Australia can also serve as a warning to governments in Canada, whereby if some of the problems faced in Canadian Aboriginal communities are not addressed soon, drastic interventions may be needed.

# A snapshot of Australian Aboriginals

There are just over half a million Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today, comprising 2.5 per cent of the Australian population. Around 75 per cent of indigenous people live in urban or regional areas of Australia; only 25 per cent live in remote areas.

Despite efforts over the past fifty years, the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is still unacceptably wide with many indigenous Australians experiencing disadvantages in terms of life expectancy, education, housing, living standards, health and employment. A snapshot of the status of indigenous Australians is provided below:

- Indigenous Australians have very low employment with only around 14 per cent receiving an income from paid employment in the real economy. Income transfers account for approximately 70 per cent of the total community income in remote communities, compared to around 10 per cent for Australia as a whole.
- Health outcomes are very low. Estimates show the life expectancy for indigenous Australians is approximately seventeen years lower than the total population for the period of 1996–2001.<sup>2</sup>
- Education outcomes are very low. Statistics show low rates of attendance and secondary completion rates of only around 11 per cent of the Aboriginal population completing year 12, compared to 38 per cent for Australia as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Data indicates that indigenous outcomes are generally worse in remote areas than urban areas, however with the large proportion of the indigenous population located in urban areas, the absolute number of indigenous people who are suffering from poor outcomes is often greater in urban and regional areas.<sup>4</sup> In the year 2008/09 the Australian Federal government invested \$700 million dollars towards closing the gap for indigenous Australians.

**“Indigenous Australians experience disadvantages in terms of life expectancy, education, housing, living standards, health and employment...”**

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## A snapshot of Canadian Aboriginals

To Canadian readers, the Australian story sounds all too familiar. According to the 2006 Census, the number of Canadians claiming Aboriginal identity was 1,172,790 while the "Status Indian" population was only 623,780, about 53 per cent of the larger number. In 2001, 3.3 per cent of the Canadian population identified themselves as Aboriginal in the census.<sup>5</sup>

A glimpse at the health and socioeconomic outcomes of Canadian Aboriginals provides a similar picture to that of Australia:

- Life expectancy at birth is 70 years for Canadian Aboriginals in comparison to 77 years for non-Aboriginal Canadians;
- Infant mortality among Status Indians on reserves is 7.2 per 1,000 live births compared to 5.2 in Canada overall;
- Suicide rates of Aboriginal people are over double the national rate and at least five times the rate in young people;
- 55 per cent of Aboriginals living off reserve and 40 per cent living on reserve have attained a high school certificate; and,
- Aboriginal youth are incarcerated at a rate eight times greater than non-Aboriginal youths.

# History of relations and policies in Australia vis-à-vis Canada

Regrettably, the history of both countries' treatment of its indigenous inhabitants is similar. This extract, taken from a Canadian report, could have been written from an Australian perspective:

The descendants of the Aboriginals were sequestered into small and mostly isolated areas of land and largely ignored except when causing inconvenience. Most traditional anchors for the human spirit—traditional values, property, economics, political organization—were eliminated or severely diminished. While there were individual exceptions and many of them, the gradual change to a culture of despair, defeat, and social disintegration led to average lives that by reference to the mainstream society were short, diseased, poor, uneducated and inward, with an unhealthy focus on the past and victimhood. The treatment of Indians was essentially governed by unilateral decisions made by the newcomers and, particularly, by their governments.<sup>6</sup>

Both Australia and Canada's history of relations with their Aboriginal people is characterized by a series of occasionally well-intentioned but misguided attempts by the government of the day to reduce disadvantages. Typically, in remote areas, governments have failed to properly coordinate their efforts and to fund them adequately, while in urban and regional areas, services provided have not been accessed by or effectively delivered to indigenous people. Blurred responsibilities have allowed federal, provincial and territory governments to avoid accountability for their failures.

The lowest point in Aboriginal relations in Australia was arguably the period between 1909 and 1969 whereby Aboriginal children were removed from their families by Australian state and federal agencies and church missions under acts of their respective parliaments. According to the *Bringing Them Home Report*, at least 100,000 children were removed from their parents, though the actual figure may be substantially higher. The impact of this policy of forced removal on the Aboriginal people has been profound; it disconnected Aboriginal children from their culture and heritage, impacted past and present Aboriginal generations, and continues to impact many generations to come.

In more recent times, Australian governments have taken strong action to intervene in Aboriginal communities in order to protect children from violence and abuse. The Northern Territory Intervention or, as it is more correctly known, the *Northern Territory National*

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*Emergency Response Act* 2007, was a legislative response from the Federal Government to the Northern Territory Government’s Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, or ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report. The operation of the *Racial Discrimination Act* 1975 was explicitly suspended and the protection of anti-discrimination law in the Northern Territory was removed for the purposes of the intervention.

The Northern Territory Intervention is a classic example of a policy that diminished its own effectiveness through its failure to engage constructively with the Aboriginal people it was intended to help. A review of the intervention showed that a number of people in communities described the significant government investment associated with the intervention as an historic opportunity wasted because of its failure to incite the partnership potential of the Aboriginal community.<sup>7</sup>

In Canada, since the inception of the 1876 *Indian Act*, legislation and policies have been implemented that single out Aboriginal people for different legal, financial and other treatment. For most Status Indians, this piece of legislation governs every aspect of reserve life, from land use to the two-year tenure of chiefs. In addition to the legislative framework, policy in Canada has focused on enforcing the relationship between the individual and the collective, consequently diminishing the individual freedom and choice of indigenous Canadians.<sup>8</sup> Problems arising due to lack of individual rights among Aboriginal people and the fact that First Nation governments are “small governments with large powers”, gives band governments too much power over band members.<sup>9</sup>

Often self-government is touted as the solution to dysfunction on Aboriginal reserves. However it is evident that general principles of good governance need to be expanded to reconcile with indigenous principles such as harmony and responsive leadership in order to affect change.<sup>10</sup>

Taking into consideration the drastic measures imposed on some Aboriginal communities in Australia, Canada might find lessons in Australia’s experience so that the path of extreme government intervention on reserves never has to be considered. That noted, the reality is that unless indigenous leaders work effectively with Ottawa to address the severe dysfunction faced by some reserves, a scenario similar to the one in Australia may not be such a distant prospect.

# Barriers to economic growth and development

Both Canada and Australia have followed the path of applying a cash-welfare system to Aboriginal communities and reserves which has resulted in “a newly debilitating revolution in lifestyles, as incentives to work decreased.”<sup>11</sup> There has also been a major displacement of Aboriginal people to settlements and urban fringes over the past century as a result of assimilation policies and changes in the pastoral industry. A substantial proportion of Aboriginal people do not live on their traditional country; they live on the traditional country of others. Traditional owners are often a minority on their own land.

A complex relationship exists between disadvantage and dysfunction in both Canada and Australia. The only way to break this cycle of disadvantage and dysfunction is to build capabilities through economic and social development based on engagement with the real economy. An artificial welfare environment continues to send this unfortunate message: “There’s something about you that means you have to have extra assistance.”<sup>12</sup> Regrettably, the structure of income support often sets up perverse incentives that encourage people towards welfare. Rather than acting as a welfare trap, as it currently does, welfare payments should instead be structured to support education and learning to help people move towards employment.

Many studies suggest that the only sustainable way to build capabilities in indigenous communities is to “pursue economic and social development, through engagement in the real economy.”<sup>13</sup> This raises the question: can remote Aboriginal communities in Australia, or Aboriginal reserves in Canada, actually become economically viable? If the purpose of having economically viable communities is to raise capabilities to pursue opportunities in their life, what capabilities are essential to develop in Aboriginal communities? Capabilities include a person’s education, health, job status, income and security, to name just a few.<sup>14</sup> As the Frontier Centre’s Joseph Quesnel has argued elsewhere:

If better-educated people are able to secure jobs, and the level of educational attainment is a large determinant of how high one’s income is, it stands to reason that Aboriginal people need to improve their education levels in order to get ahead.<sup>15</sup>

Education is a key capability that must be developed in both Australia and Canada. Australia is in the process of drafting an Indigenous Education Action Plan. This plan identifies national, jurisdictional and local action across six domains that evidence shows will contribute to improved outcomes in indigenous education. Canada should consider

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developing an Aboriginal education policy and action plan in order to stimulate change and increase this particular capability, which has the potential to influence many other capabilities.

## Aboriginal policy to achieve positive social outcomes

It is evident that many policies and practices in Australia and Canada have not been based on a consideration of current evidence about what works in indigenous communities. Future policy actions by governments should be based around the following principles:<sup>16</sup>

- Genuine engagement with communities in talking about, developing and implementing policies;
- Active and well-supported indigenous-led decision making in program design;
- Bottom-up approaches that incorporate local knowledge within a national framework;
- Local and region-specific programs that are tailored to the needs of particular communities rather than one-size-fits-all approaches;
- Investment in and financial support for local indigenous leadership;
- Long-term investment in strengthening communities at a local level to decide and manage their own lives;
- Programs and policy approaches that are geared towards long-term achievements;
- Real investment of dollars and people based on need and ongoing support for programs that work;
- Regular and independent public evaluation of government programs and policies to make sure we learn from mistakes and successes; and
- Cooperative approaches by state, federal and local governments and their agencies which reduce the burden of duplication and red tape on community organizations.<sup>17</sup>

Closing the gap between Aboriginal populations and other Australians and Canadians will require more than just 'throwing more money' at the problem as successive governments have done. For example, spending on indigenous health programs in Australia alone has increased by 328 per cent over the past twelve years (from \$115 million to \$492 million), yet there have been no significant improvements in health outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Improvements in indigenous outcomes will only occur once greater accountability is achieved.



## Where to now?

Much of the language used in government policy pertaining to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people refers to a “new partnership” with indigenous people. Noel Pearson, a leader in the Cape York community in Australia, argues that government bureaucracy interprets “partnerships” as a continuation of existing government programs and service delivery with an emphasis of “whole of government” and “coordination.” He asserts governments do not often recognize a need to change the way in which services are delivered to indigenous communities.<sup>19</sup>

Canada and Australia can learn from each other’s mistakes as well as successes. The difficulties faced by each country are not unique, and valuable evidence and learning can be gained from experiences shared. If the various government policies are to operate as a genuine mix of measures to address Aboriginal disadvantage, there must be adjustments in the machinery of government to enable better coordination of services, greater responsiveness to the unique characteristics of each community and higher levels of community participation in the design and delivery of services.

**“There must be adjustments in the machinery of government to enable better coordination of services, greater responsiveness...”**

## ENDNOTES

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## FURTHER READING

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**Respecting the Seventh Generation:  
A voluntary plan for relocating  
non-viable Native reserves**<http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/3171>

November 2008

**Settling Old Debts**<http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/2464>

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