

Turning guilt into billions of dollars

Aboriginals must move from dependence to living in the 21st century

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I hope Canadians were paying attention during the aboriginal peoples' Day of Action Friday, because it's really time we did something to normalize the situation of our indigenous people. By normalize, I don't mean writing huge cheques or offering lifetime welfare to people who are willing to live on remote reserves. By normalize, I mean helping native Canadians to live in the 21st century like the rest of us.

Native leaders are always eager to pull the twin levers of unsettled land claims and aboriginal poverty to keep the non-native population feeling guilty, sympathetic and willing to ship billions of dollars a year to natives on reserves.

Clearly, it works. This year, the federal government will spend \$7.4 billion on services for the 428,000 people on reserves. When has so much money been spent on so few people for so little result?

It's hardly surprising that some reserves have Third World conditions. Why would anyone expect to be able to live a normal life on a reserve hundreds of kilometres from the nearest town? A non-native person living in the bush wouldn't fare any better. Actually, he'd be worse off, because government wouldn't feel an obligation to support him.

The popular wisdom is that the reserves' poverty and poor living conditions are our problem to solve, not that of aboriginal people themselves. How many more years are we going to keep these people in a state of child-like dependency? Or maybe a better question, how many years will they continue to live in that state before they decide to take some control of their lives?

Nothing compels native people to stay on reserves, although one could certainly fault government for offering handouts and tax-free status as incentives to stay in these pathetic conditions.

For people on reserves that are successful and self-sustaining, and there are many, the decision to keep living there is a reasonable one and entirely theirs to make. One does have to note that if the reserve is sustained by a casino, it's not exactly the traditional native lifestyle, but that's not our problem.

The issue of land claims is the most vexatious. Again, we are supposed to feel guilty because we haven't written cheques quickly enough. And yet, how credible are these claims? Take as an example the Algonquin claim to ownership of pretty much all of

Eastern Ontario, including Parliament Hill. It rests on the idea that the ancestors of today's Algonquins once roamed through this territory, although there was no concept of land ownership in the European sense.

A lawyer representing the Algonquins says a key point in their favour is that some Algonquins in the 19th century charged people for the use of the Ottawa River. Must mean they own it, no? Sure, in the same way that Robin Hood must have owned Sherwood Forest.

The Eastern Ontario Algonquins know there isn't much good Crown land left in this part of the province. They will be perfectly happy to compromise and accept cash. And who are these Algonquins seeking fairness and justice? They are a group of about 5,500 people. Perhaps 10,000 will ultimately be identified. To qualify, one can have as little as one-eighth Algonquin blood.

Toronto lawyer Bob Potts, who represents the "Algonquins," says any money they receive will help to "maintain their Algonquin-ness." One might debate how much Algonquin-ness a person with one native ancestor three generations back has.

These land claims have a basis in law, but we're paying to settle land ownership claims for people who

didn't own land. If the key concept is taking aboriginal land without compensation, we should remember that the home territory of various bands fluctuated, depending on the aggressive tendencies of other Indian groups. When will we have a commission to investigate the inequity of the Iroquois taking land that once belonged to the Hurons and compensate the distant descendants of those Huron people?

Native leaders like to talk about poverty and injustice, but what they really want is money. Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Phil Fontaine says native people were shut out in each of the last two federal budgets. Some shutout. The federal government spends \$10.2 billion a year on native people. What he means is there weren't any new handouts on top of the ones already being dispensed.

If we cut down to the reality that underlies the myth of native oppression, we'd find that aboriginal people have exactly the same rights and opportunities as every other Canadian. If they don't take advantage of it, that's their problem.

Congratulations to the approximately 550,000 native people who live off reserve, just like ordinary people. They've realized it's the 21st century, not the 18th. Maybe they can spread the word.

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