

Income Disparity and the Impact on Aboriginal Albertans

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The following is a transcript of an Alberta College of Social Workers podcast recorded January 31, 2008. [Click here](#) to hear the audio version.

INTERVIEWER: What aspects of income disparity impact Aboriginals?

BRENDA: When we talk about disparity we talk about inequality in all components of society. Health, housing, employment, education, land resources, economic development. All of those components are affected and poverty is the main piece behind it.

When we look at the Aboriginal population which is about 4% of the Canadian population, we have a disproportional representation in every sector of society. In health care, we're looking at one in eight children having a learning disability. We're looking at one in eight Aboriginals having some form of handicap or health concern. A suicide rate from 6% to 11% compared to the national average of 3%.

We're looking at diabetes of an epidemic proportion right now of 30% in the Aboriginal population. We're looking at HIV as one of the highest growing diseases in Canada. The Métis have an unemployment rate of approximately 30%. We have an unemployment rate in First Nations of 40% in some areas, and we have an unemployment rate of 60% amongst Inuit. The national average is 12% so they are disproportionately represented.

We represent 18 to 37 percent of inmates in the legal systems. We have a dropout rate of almost 30% in our Aboriginal youth. 37% of our Aboriginal population in Western Canada have less than a high school diploma. That impacts our employment rate.

30% of our Aboriginal population off reserve have inadequate housing and that includes homeless rates. We're in a baby boom in that over 50% of our population is under 25. In comparison mainstream society is looking at baby boomers retiring and impacting senior's supports in five or 10 years as we start to retire.

The impact is that all of these services and supports right now are not culturally relevant to how we think and how we perceive our world life. When we look at income disparity and all the supports being put in place they are catering to mainstream society; western philosophies. Yet we are overrepresented in every sector. People wonder, "Why hasn't there been a change for the Aboriginal population?" Because components haven't changed so we still have those rates despite several attempts over the last ten, fifteen, twenty years.

The Royal Commission Report came out in 1996 with a lot of recommendations that weren't seriously implemented with the government until 2004 with Paul Martin's government. He worked with First Nations, Aboriginal organizations and Aboriginal leaders for eighteen months in the Kelowna Agreement. He came up with something very substantial to deal with the disparity in our communities.

That was voted down and thrown off to the side by the Canadian government with Harper. Income disparity in Aboriginal people? We're just existing, we are not finding solutions. It's band-aids. There is no change and there's a lot of pressure: "How come?" "Why isn't it?" The answers are fairly clear to us but it's getting those voices heard and having the social systems recognize that things need to change. If they don't change our environment, our social and economic conditions are not going to change.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see the situation getting worse in the future than it is now?

BRENDA: Oh, definitely. If we look at the Canadian government, Harper threw away the Kelowna Agreement. That took 18 months. That was a lot of intensive work on a national level with all the political leaders and Aboriginal leaders. Key stakeholders were involved and there was a serious commitment from the Canadian government. Well, where is it now? It doesn't exist.

The United Nations Declaration for Aboriginal Human Rights was voted down. It was passed in the United Nations despite Canada voting no. Our own government voted no against the Aboriginal Human Rights Declaration which is sad. It tells you right there where we sit within our own Canadian government.

We have a provincial government who, when Stelmach got in, immediately got rid of two Aboriginal MLAs who were in the cabinet. We were blended into intergovernmental and interdepartmental relations. We're an afterthought. We've been downsized provincially.

The 20-year plan. I was looking at it yesterday. Nothing in there for Aboriginal people. Nothing about Alberta seriously committing to invest time and energy and dollars to address the disparity issue for Aboriginal people. If you look at Aboriginal people right there with us are the other people who are not valued in society. Single moms, seniors, handicapped. They are citizens in this province and in this country that are never valued. They are undereducated. If you are working poor you're not going to get help - you'll get a band-aid service.

INTERVIEWER: You talked earlier about policies and some programs not being culturally relevant for Aboriginal people. Can you talk more about what has to change to make it more culturally relevant?

BRENDA: The analogy that I use is smoking laws. There's been a social change in the last five years and the government has made a commitment for smoking. They've put in millions of dollars for media promotions, laws and enforcements to stop smoking. And yet they don't make the commitment for social changes. Society is buying into that.

Twenty years ago if you were pregnant, you could drink. Ten years ago it was okay to smoke in restaurants. It's that kind of mental shift, societal shift that needs to occur when we talk about delivery of social programs and the types of supports needed.

Right now society is bent on western ways of doing things: the medical model; the clinical model; the "you don't fit into society so you're sick. We're going to help heal you". Maybe it's the systems that are the problem.

We have inherited legislative laws and a political philosophy that comes from England; the Elizabethan poor laws. If you were poor, you were put in jail. Women were property; children were property. We have a patriarchal influence and in Canada you see that reflected. From the onset of the English takeover they saw us as savages that had to be trained. They took us and put us into residential schools for assimilation to get rid of the Aboriginal culture. The laws reflect that.

You see that for domestic violence. Women are not really valued in society. How hard is it to have a rapist or a serial killer have the full extent of the law enforced for abominations that are done to women and children? That's reflected in our laws and in the court systems. Aboriginal people are in that same boat.

Until we start putting political pressure as a society to make those laws change; until we as professionals change how we deliver those services we're going to keep perpetuating the same kind of oppression. We're not going to get to the root of hearing what it is exactly that would help an individual or group of individuals and really make that commitment financially to make those changes. So it comes down to the individual. What do I want to do? What am I willing to relearn? Change promotes fear and people have a lot of comfort in thinking that they know what they're doing and that it's right. So it's very challenging.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of social policy change should the provincial government initiate or support to help Albertans make that mental shift regarding their attitudes to Aboriginal peoples, or the way in which programs and services are currently delivered?

BRENDA: I'm impressed with what Paul Martin did with the round table discussions. That's the kind of commitment it takes to make social changes. When you have your leader saying, "This is important and we're going to do this" and they put the money and the mandate and the processes in place that allows those changes to occur, then you're going to have social changes.

You see it in the smoking bylaw. You see it in those simple things that are easy to put in as a mandate. But to make those kinds of social changes is almost the same as the gay/lesbian controversy. Who wants into that hot pot and make that commitment?

There is a lot of ambiguity towards Aboriginals. A lot of people don't understand what's behind the basis of what we are asking for. I was watching APTN last night and Kevin Costner has done an eight part series called *500 Nations*. In it, he talks about North America's European influence on Aboriginal people and the atrocities that were done.

That doesn't mean you have to make atonement or carry that guilt because of what happened 500 or 200 years ago. It means that you need to acknowledge the influences that impacted this whole population of Aboriginal people so that you can develop some empathy and create that understanding. After you have gotten the education of history you would say, "Oh, this makes sense."

You see it in the Romanian orphans. They didn't have any human contact. They had long-term emotional and psychological problems. Our residential schools did exactly that for our Aboriginal people and we're dealing with those ripple effects to this day. That's why we've had these residential school syndromes in the payouts that have been happening with the Canadian government. They are acknowledging there was something that did happen and it's had a devastating effect in our communities. That's what needs to happen; for the government to really make a commitment.

INTERVIEWER: You've been working in community development. You're a social worker working in that area related to Aboriginal issues. What have you seen in terms of your work and the challenges that you've had to face as a social worker to try and help others in advancing community development?

Brenda: Advancement of community development for Aboriginal agencies or Aboriginal people in Alberta is very difficult. Look at the way programs and services are delivered and the philosophies; the methods that are used.

Social workers go into educational facilities and they have their training. If you are a native social worker or if you are a social worker who is working with that population, you don't really get the knowledge from people who can teach you.

Now that doesn't mean if you're a social worker and you're going to work with an Aboriginal population that you have to convert to our way of life. There's a misconception about that. "Oh, you have to attend a sweat. Oh, you have to go to a round dance." That's not going to give you an understanding of how we think and how we see the world. It's not going to help you understand how to communicate with us better. Even native social workers, who are the younger population, if they don't have the connection to the traditional people who know those values and those philosophies and the ceremonies, they're only going to learn the western way of how to perform social work. So they go back into their community and they are not accepted by the community because they're talking the same way as western.

You have a lot of Aboriginals who are moving into urban cities. Out of the Aboriginal population, 69% are moving into cities and that's because of the unemployment conditions and the living conditions. They move into the cities and are not finding anything better there. They need to access education. That's the only hope out.

Now you're not learning the material you need to learn in a culturally relevant learning model that is not going to help you in your own community or in your own population. It's almost the same as a residential school. You are not fitting in either world again.

Those are some of the barriers that we have. Many Aboriginals are unable to connect to the people who can show them and teach them what it's like to be an Aboriginal. Why they think the way they do. The values that we have in our community.

Even though you may be born in the city there is something inside you that is different. How you interpret and process information. How you feel and incorporate that into your world view perspective. That's all different and you struggle around and you think, "Why am I not fitting in?" You tried the best you can and you always feel the odd man out.

Once you start learning about your culture - it's not just the ceremonies - it's why we think the way we do. The values. Why we feel more kinship to Aboriginal people and family. Why we do not value material things as much as other people. These are things that are inherent in our personalities. I believe in our genetic code so once we start connecting in that way then maybe those people will join and become an entity onto them. They become the ones that are liaising with other helping professionals to make services more appropriate for the Aboriginal population.

INTERVIEWER: The Aboriginal challenges that we've been talking about. How does that affect Albertans in general?

BRENDA: A lot of reports are coming out of the Edmonton/Calgary corridor. They are projecting that a lot of people are going to be moving into that corridor in the next four years. If we have a huge population of Aboriginal people moving into that corridor as well then we have a high unemployment rate and high housing issues; high education issues; high health issues.

We're going to affect social support systems in every city. We see that in the larger Aboriginal population areas of Winnipeg, Saskatoon and Vancouver. These populations have doubled; almost tripled. This is going to be a huge factor.

If we're in a baby boom and we're all moving to the city and we think differently and feel differently, and we have this mandate but it's not really being fulfilled, we're going to have a huge impact. The bonus is that there are other marginalized groups in Canadian society like women, minorities, gay/lesbians, seniors, handicaps. They are lumped right in there with us as the undesirables; the unproductive ones; the ones that are undeserving for supports. These groups are going to affect the cities more and more. We see that in Calgary today.

INTERVIEWER: What's the single most important thing from your perspective that the Alberta government can do in terms of social policy change related to what we've been talking about?

BRENDA: They need to do more than lip service. They need to make an actual commitment. They need to show and demonstrate that they are serious about addressing these needs by making it part of their visible policy. If it's somewhere in the cultural plan, I didn't see anything. I saw a lot of recreation and parks but I didn't see anything about the uniqueness of what we offer to Albertans in terms of our history and "Head Smashed-in Buffalo Jump" - expanding that richness of our heritage throughout Alberta. That's a part of our history that a lot of Albertan really enjoy.

When we talk about homelessness and housing we need to look at the types of services and supports that are needed to address those. Three months for a homeless shelter? That's not doing anything for us. We have municipalities that are kind of blending us into their own city plans to address homelessness so it's not really taking it seriously that our needs are specific.

We have high addiction rates. We have high domestic abuse. We have all of these serious social issues that we have to deal with in order to address homelessness and unemployment. How can you even think about going to work or school if you're dealing with molestation, domestic abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder or childhood trauma? You have to work through those kinds of things before you can get your mind to even grasp the concept of a stable environment.

Women have had those kinds of traumas because we've been subjected to a lot of dysfunctional history in our lives. There are those pieces that need to be addressed. The government is just business: corporation and business. It's not looking at the human part of being a citizen in Alberta. It's looking at the money and how do we join the global market? How do we look good?

It's not going to work if you have human suffering at the very basic street level. How are you going to attract tourism if you have people living off the streets? In Manitoba, there was an elderly homeless person frozen for two days before anybody even noticed he was dead.

These are the human stories that government needs to listen to. I think as social workers we see that. We're right there, front line, with people and we see the social issues. A lot of us have the solutions but the heads of state don't meet with us. They talk with other key stakeholders who aren't invested emotionally. It looks good politically and on a corporate or business level.

INTERVIEWER: So social infrastructure needs to be much more of a priority?

BRENDA: Definitely. I see the social structure right now just being child welfare. 55% of all children in care are Aboriginal and fostered out to homes that aren't native even though the government has a mandate that they should be connected to their Aboriginal culture. There is no follow-up.

In any of these programs and services, even with Native organizations, there is no follow-up to say, "Are you doing what you said you were going to do?" Long-term longitudinal studies, research studies; the government is not going to invest in that. If you are going to work on a well to see if there's water in there and put money into it you need to make sure you're working on the right well. Right now the government has a 20-year plan. It's got some nice points but for social policies I didn't see a lot in there.