

Welfare is Not an Occupation

By Beverley O'Neil

"Since the Burnt Church-Mi'kmaq fishing rights court decision on Aboriginal fishing rights, fishing is now the number one employer in our community replacing welfare", said a Maritimes Aboriginal business leader at the National Business Summit of Aboriginal business leaders in Toronto in February 2003. I was stunned to hear that, and I asked myself, "When did welfare become an occupation?"

For far too many Aboriginal communities, the reality is that the dependency on welfare by their people is rising. It is beginning to spiral out of control the way a car does when it hits black ice. One report revealed that the average number of Aboriginal welfare recipients has risen from 40 to 41 percent over a 10 year period beginning 1988-89. If one percent doesn't seem like much, consider the fact that our Aboriginal population increased in 2001 Census from 2.7 percent of the Canadian population to 3.3 percent, representing 976,305 people, and the Aboriginal birthrate is 1.5 times greater than that of the non-Aboriginal population. Does it seem insignificant now?

For 45 percent of Canada's First Nations people, social assistance is their only source of income. With rates as high as this, the fear and reality is that social assistance is becoming a cultural practice. Unfortunately there are families whose children follow in the footsteps of their parents. As soon as these children are old enough, they too become SA beneficiaries, and the cycle continues. Welfare becomes the family tradition like Sunday dinners. Instead of the children adopting the role of community hunter or healer or fisher or weaver, as their ancestors once did, the occupation becomes welfare. A new family tradition is formed. Children learn from their parents.

Social assistance has become an acceptable way of life for too many people and their families. While for centuries children have been encouraged to adopt the occupation of their parents, children of social assistance parents are too following in the footsteps of their parents creating inter-generational welfare families.

"Welfare isn't a part of First Nation culture" I've heard many Elders say. They can recall the first person in their community to get welfare. "Our community has never been the same," they say and add, "We used to help each other out, support ourselves, not any more, not after welfare."

A Chief pointed out that one of the causes of inter-generational SA is lack of education, remarking "When the child gets home from school with homework, mom and dad don't help him with it, because they don't know how. They don't know how, because they themselves don't have an education." So that deters the kids from doing their homework; and education is played down, an essential element to putting salt on that black ice, ending the dependency. The child may not be encouraged to go to school. What is needed is a plow.

Not all welfare parents are like that. For the self-respecting people, there is no pride in welfare, it is not the end, but they believe it is the means to the end of dependency. Every Aboriginal community knows of SA recipients who desperately want to make positive changes and break the cycle. Changes to SA benefits have made it even more difficult and frustrating for both the

SA recipient and case worker. Many are single parents, mostly moms, just trying to make ends meet and trying to break the cycle. They're frustrated because they can't get the support they need to get that education that will help them qualify for a job that pays a decent wage... thus enabling them to support their children. But daycare, shelter, food and education support have been reduced. To add insult to injury, these struggling parents report that they see other SA recipients seemingly wasting their money away. I spoke with a few of these young mom's. They all seemed to share the same sentiment ... "I want to get off SA, be able to support myself and my children, but I can't do it without help. Then I see people I know on SA wasting the money away, buying drugs and booze with it when they're capable of working. That money can be better used for people that want to change." These parents are frustrated because the support and flexibility they need is not available to them in a system designed to crack down without regard for what is breaking.

Social Assistance and the changes made impact the whole family and community. For the single parent their ability to feed one's children is smashed, violence and child welfare become magnified, young people's ability to get an education and become self-dependent is hampered, the dignity and independence of Elders is lost, health suffers along with the ability to gain employment. The spiral tightens and speeds up.

But how can this spiralling end? Somehow control needs to be gained. The snow bank this car hits is fastly changing from to an embankment, or worse, a cliff. During the "Weaving Our Future Conference" in Vancouver in early March, Dr. Martin Spigelman presented several recommendations on how First Nation communities can assist their people with overcoming the impact of Social Assistance reductions, and as well, to reverse the trend of dependency to self-dependency. First, he said, is to "target those most affected by the changes, whether children, adults or Elders; and second, target efforts to keep people off welfare in the first place." Integral to his recommendations was linking Physical Development with Economic Development, Social Supports and Structure.

Enough can't be said about the importance of linking. With diminishing resources in our communities, the need for partnering and creativity is rising. The Huu-Ay-Aht First Nation on the west coast of Vancouver Island took the spiralling welfare dependency and converted it to a controlled spin to the reverse. A community that received more the 80 percent of its funding from government reversed this in 3 years to 80 percent of funds it generated on its own. This occurred through a partnership with Weyhauser, which has resulted in employment choices and business opportunities, the construction of a community centre where cultural programs for youth, elders and non-Aboriginal people can be shared, and the restoration of the river for salmon spawning. But probably the biggest gain is that it fostered the restoration of self-pride germinated from the opportunity to make one's own way. Huu-Ay-Aht Chief Robert Dennis said, "I realized I talked a lot about what wasn't happening, instead of doing something." It was when he applied his energy to change for the community that change actually took place.

Key to Dr. Spigelman's comments is to focus on what you can do. I suggest, that what he means is, don't take a garden spade to plow a road. Remove the ice with success. Nothing spawns success better than success itself.

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