

Urban Aboriginal People: A Claimed Identity



Regroupement des centres
d'amitié autochtones du Québec

July 2006

" We are not a people from the past, but it is our roots that give us the drive to move forward, our sense of direction, our vocation, our path. We are Indians, we are arrows in the air, being who we are and who we were, seeking to be the path leading forward. Nothing governs us except what we have chosen ourselves. Yesterday's strength, the way the wind is presently blowing and destiny are all crossing our path, but we are the ones who decide."
Subcommander Marcos, The Zapatistas' March, 2001



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This collective reflection was carried out by the actors of the Québec Friendship Centres Movement. It presents the issues and challenges faced by Aboriginal people coping with the urban reality and constitutes the Movement's platform.



Introduction

Is it possible to be “Aboriginal” in the city ? The city is a choice for some people; for others, it is an obligation. Today, because of the very conditions they live in, urban Aboriginal people are in such a vulnerable situation that they are forced to ask themselves fundamental questions about not only their own fate but also about the future of their brothers and sisters living in the communities. When leaving their community to live in the city, Aboriginal people ultimately lose the natural protection of their home community and are directly faced with a non Aboriginal environment that, without being necessarily hostile, nonetheless defends its own customs and values that are very different from those defining Aboriginal people.

In order to ensure the preservation of their culture and identity in the city, urban Aboriginal people did not, by any means, wait for others to suggest solutions. On the contrary, they created organisations and meeting places that contribute to strengthen their identity and their cultural, social, economic and political conditions. In that sense, the Native Friendship Centres Movement constitutes an efficient and accessible network that promotes the development of an emerging community: the urban Aboriginal community.

PASHKABIGONI is an Algonquin word referring to flowers releasing their pollen. *PASHKABIGONI* can also refer to a new reality: the migration of Aboriginal people to the cities, as in an “Aboriginal diaspora”. Diaspora is defined as “the dissemination of a community across the world”. With the increasing urbanisation of Aboriginal people, we observe a will to define their place, their values and their future as Anishnabe, Eeyou, Attikamekw or others within the dominant society while preserving their own identity.

Native Friendship Centres: A History, a Movement and People

The Native Friendship Centres Movement has been active at the national level for over fifty (50) years. In Canada, there are over 120 Native Friendship Centres working with urban Aboriginal populations. These Centres are members of the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC). In Québec, the movement has been existing for almost thirty-five (35) years and includes seven (7) Native Friendship Centres¹ and another one is being developed in Sept-Îles. The Native Friendship Centres’ mission is to improve the quality of life of Aboriginal citizens, promote culture and build bridges with the non Aboriginal community.

¹ Friendship Centres in Québec: Montreal, Quebec City, La Tuque, Val-d’Or, Senneterre, Chibougamau and Lanaudière.



Native Friendship Centres are service institutions for Aboriginal people in urban areas. They have also become important learning and training organisations for thousands of Aboriginal persons. Advocating for the rights and interests of Aboriginal citizens, Friendship Centres work on a daily basis at developing a better understanding of the issues, challenges and problems of urban Aboriginals, not only among the non Native citizens of Québec but also among our fellow citizens living in First Nation communities.

Since their creation, Friendship Centres have been incubators of important initiatives that lead to the implementation of numerous programs and services for Aboriginal people in urban areas. Friendship Centres have thus become, throughout the years, a preferred place for expressing the needs, aspirations and claims of a segment of the Aboriginal population, that is, those living in urban areas.

The Regroupement des Centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec

Thirty years ago, Native Friendship Centres in Québec came together under a consultation, coordination and representation structure: the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ).

Since 1976, RCAAQ represents the interests of Native Friendship Centres in Québec. RCAAQ is a grassroots movement made up of both Aboriginal people living in or transiting through urban areas and Native Friendship Centres. Because of the diversity of individuals making up the movement, our mission is oriented towards the well-being of people and communities within a community-based approach. This approach considers the cultural, social, economic and political development. Moreover, we offer a democratic forum where a collective voice can express itself with due regard for differences (nations, cultures, languages, place of residence) and where diversity is a source of enrichment. Finally, RCAAQ was founded by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people.

RCAAQ's mission is to advocate for the individual and collective rights and interests of urban Aboriginal people. Our mission is carried out at two different levels. On one hand, RCAAQ supports the Québec Friendship Centres by ensuring, among others, the development and implementation of province-wide programs. It supports its members in carrying out their mission by providing advice, assistance and technical resources. On the other hand, RCAAQ plays a representation role on behalf of its Centres and establishes partnerships at the provincial and national level. It encourages concerted action and discussions between First Nations members in Québec and different government bodies. Finally, RCAAQ provides communication services to its members in Canada's two official languages.



In a nutshell, RCAAQ is a consultation, communication and exchange structure, a forum for developing and sharing ideas, and a support service for Native Friendship Centres in Québec, as well as the preferred interlocutor with federal and provincial government authorities, First Nations governments, and Aboriginal² and non Aboriginal institutions.

Therefore, RCAAQ plays an important role in the whole urban Aboriginal dynamics in Québec and evolves within a context of changing times.

General Profile of Urban Aboriginal People in Canada

In Canada, there are 976,000 Aboriginal people, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. This number represents 3.3% of the Canadian population and it is anticipated to increase significantly. Aboriginal citizens living off reserve account for 48%³ of the total Aboriginal population. In Québec, the Aboriginal population is estimated at 1.1% of the total population. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of First Nation and Inuit people in Québec live outside their home community. Although lower than the Canadian average of off-reserve Aboriginal people (48%), the off-reserve First Nation and Inuit population in Québec stills represents a substantial portion, i.e. between ¼ and 1/3 of Québec's registered Indians.

There is therefore a significant Aboriginal presence in large Canadian cities. The report of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* talks about an accelerated urbanisation movement over the past thirty years. It states that "*the urban Aboriginal population is expected to double by 2016.*"⁴

The urban Aboriginal population is in full growth. In fact, many experts suggest that between 1971 and 1996, it has experienced a real population explosion. During that period, the Aboriginal population in cities increased by more than 250%, i.e. eight (8) times faster than the Canadian population. Many factors influenced the accelerated growth of urban Aboriginal people: first, the natural population increase and the Aboriginal people's migration to urban areas. However, another significant factor explains the recent Aboriginal baby boom, which is the concept of "ethnic mobility"⁵. Ethnic mobility is the phenomenon by which individuals and families experience changes in their ethnic affiliation. In a

² National Association of Friendship Centres, Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, Native Para-judicial Services of Quebec, First Nation Human Resources Development Commission of Quebec, certain working groups of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission, Comité aviseur à l'action communautaire autonome du Québec (Committee on Independent Community Action of Quebec)

³ STATISTICS Canada 2001, Profile of the Aboriginal population, 2001. Ottawa, Government of Canada. The accepted data are the census data that were adjusted to take into account the reserves that were only partially surveyed in 2001.

⁴ ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES, volume 1 to 5. Ottawa, Government of Canada, 1996.

⁵ Guimond E. "Ethnic Mobility and the Demographic Growth of Canada's Aboriginal Population." in Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal People, 2003. Ottawa, Government du Canada.



nutshell, the notion of ethnic mobility refers to the complexity created by the self-identification concept used by Statistics Canada to define affiliation to an Aboriginal group in Canada.

To further illustrate the impact of the ethnic mobility factor, let us use Bill C-31, adopted in 1985. The enactment of this act allowed many individuals, mostly women, to recover their Indian status within the meaning of the Indian Act. These Indian women were “reinstated” in the Indian Register of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada, and therefore recovered their status. They had lost their status because they had married a non Aboriginal person. In 1999, close to 115,000 people had been reinstated as Indians pursuant to Bill C-31. Seventy percent (70%) of them were living off-reserve.

Demographers also observe that “ethnic mobility (...) results from a change in a person’s ethnic status over time.” Social factors such as the improved public perception of Aboriginal people and the restoration of their image and pride, combined with the Statistics Canada’s self-identification concept, could motivate certain people to declare Aboriginal status.

To sum it up, the important increase of the urban Aboriginal population results from three main factors: natural population growth, migration from communities to cities, and ethnic mobility. Notwithstanding these factors, the 2001 census confirms that the Aboriginal population has more than doubled in most large Canadian cities.

Aboriginal People’s Socio-Economic Conditions

Aboriginal populations have one of the highest poverty rates in Canada. This fact was underlined by Prime Minister Paul Martin in his Reply to the Speech from the Throne in 2004:

“There is one aspect of Canadian society, one aspect of our history, that casts a shadow over all that we have achieved. The continuing gap in life conditions between Aboriginal and other Canadians is intolerable”.⁶

In April 2005, United Nations Special Investigator on the situation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, tabled a report on the disparities between Aboriginal people and other

⁶ Prime Minister Paul Martin, Reply to the Speech from the Throne, February 3, 2004



Canadians. Mr. Stavenhagen states that: "*Indigenous people in Canada are poorer, sicker, less educated, more socially excluded...*"⁷. The report notes that Canada ranks eighth among 174 countries included in the UN's Human Development Report 2003. But Canada's ranking plummets to 48th position when the indicators of economic, social and human wellbeing and quality of life for Aboriginal peoples alone is calculated, which is just before Mexico, i.e. a situation equivalent to that of a so called "advanced third world country." Still according to this index, urban Indigenous people in Canada rank 37th.

The report points a finger at poverty, which affects 60% of Aboriginal children and is acutely experienced in the cities. The main cause of this poverty among Aboriginal people is the low educational level. A poor education result in low participation in the labour market and this reality becomes the inheritance of the following generations.

As for urban Aboriginal people, the 2005 report made public by Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada network committed to eliminating child and family poverty in Canada, states the following:

" Responding to the specific needs of urban Aboriginal communities, now the majority of the Aboriginal population, is critical if Aboriginal children and youth are to thrive, not merely survive." ⁸

Campaign 2000 draws the following profile of urban Aboriginal children's poverty:

- ▮ *Children (0-14 years) make up 33% of Canada's Aboriginal population, compared to 19% of the non-Aboriginal population.*
- ▮ *Almost half (46%) of Aboriginal children under 15 years old live with a lone parent.*
- ▮ *Forty percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty.*
- ▮ *One in every four off-reserve Aboriginal children lives in poor housing conditions, compared to 13% of all children in Canada.⁹*

This reality affecting Aboriginal people was at the heart of the discussions that took place at the conference of First Ministers and Aboriginal leaders of Canada. This summit meeting was held in Kelowna in November 2005. The leaders committed to reduce poverty in Aboriginal communities within 10 years. In its election platform of January 2006, the current government promised: "*to*

⁷ UNITED NATIONS and STAVENHAGEN, Rodulfo. Report on the socio-economic conditions of Indigenous people in Canada presented to the UN Human Rights Commission, 2005.

⁸ Campaign 2000 "Decision Time for Canada: Let's Make Poverty History", 2005 Report Card on Child Poverty in Canada.

⁹ Idem.



improve the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples in the area of health and social services, education, infrastructures, public security, and to promote economic development by creating opportunities.”¹⁰

In response to these campaign promises, the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) called upon the Harper government in these words:

“ If this government is serious about closing the opportunity gap between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, it will put in place as Urban Aboriginal Strategy that is adequately resourced.”¹¹

Emerging Urban Aboriginal Communities in Québec

Today, we can certainly observe the emergence of urban Aboriginal communities in Québec. Contrary to the Western provinces, there exist practically no comprehensive studies, research and analyses on urban Aboriginal people in Québec. This is perhaps due to the fact that migration to urban areas started later. In fact, in Western Canada, the Aboriginal urbanisation phenomenon dates back to the 1950s. In Québec, migration from reserves to cities started to increase around the mid-1970s. At that time, the cities of Montreal, Quebec City, Val-d’Or, Chibougamau, Sept-Îles and La Tuque saw an inflow of Aboriginal people. Today, these towns – as well as Gatineau, Roberval, Baie-Comeau, Maniwaki and Joliette – have a significant and visible Aboriginal population. Of course, this Aboriginal presence is the talk of the town! In Val-d’Or, for instance, on main street’s sidewalks, Cree, Anishnabe, Attikamekw and Inuit faces mix with Québécois faces. Invisible in the past, Aboriginal people now represent an important segment of the population that can no longer be ignored.

After more than 35 years of Aboriginal urbanisation in Québec, we can say that in 2006 there exists a strong and diversified Aboriginal identity, coloured by the urban reality, in the cities as on the reserves. These urban communities, geographically scattered, are made up of a large cultural and linguistic diversity. Many members of this community maintain close relationships to their community of origin. In Québec, over the last three decades, these communities have established a strong infrastructure as well as institutions and organisations, including the Native Friendship Centres network. As architects of these community, social, cultural and economic development organisations, these

¹⁰ CONSERVATIVE PARTY OF CANADA. Conservative party’s commitment to Canada’s First Nations. 2006.

¹¹ National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC). Press release “National Association of Friendship Centres Awaits Action by Harper Government on Election Commitments to Urban Aboriginal Peoples” March 10, 2006.



communities have managed to preserve an authentic and dynamic Aboriginal cultural identity.

In fact, researchers interested in the issues faced by urban Aboriginal people in Canada are re-examining their working framework and the concepts underlying their thinking and analytical approaches. David Newhouse, professor at the Department of Native Studies, Trent University, states that:

*"... the concept of urbanisation, which has long been discussed from the sole perspective of acculturation or cultural dispossession, clearly needs to be updated in light of all the changes that have marked the path taken by Aboriginal people over the past three decades."*¹²

Thus, what we need to understand is that the profile of Aboriginal people in the cities is changing. Part of this diversified and cosmopolitan population comes from the communities. However, the urban communities gave birth to a new generation of Aboriginal people who never experienced life on a reserve. This urban reality is better recognised and documented in Western Canada. In Québec, this phenomenon is relatively recent and therefore very little documented. But experience confirms that in Québec, the urban Aboriginal population includes second- and third-generation members of First Nation and Inuit origin who never lived in the community where they are registered. Experts describe this situation as follows:

*"...the concept of assimilation is no longer appropriate in discussing the ways in which the dominant culture and Aboriginal cultures are meeting in cities. In this meeting of cultures, we are seeing new modes of expression that are more closely associated with a strengthening of Aboriginal cultural identity than with its fragmentation and disintegration."*¹³

Aboriginal people's urban experience is related to community institutions, notably Native Friendship Centres. Involvement in these organisations allows to acquire a sense of community, a shared history and values. In cities with a Native Friendship Centre, it is often through them that people develop relationships, mix and come together. According to our experience, Friendship Centres also allow people to feel valued and capable of making a difference. They provide job, volunteer work and leadership opportunities, among other things. These institutions, with over 35 years of existence in Québec, represent an efficient means to enhance the quality of life of Aboriginal citizens.

¹² Lévesque Carole, The Presence of Aboriginal Peoples in Quebec's Cities: Multiple Movements, Diverse Issues. In "Not Strangers in These Parts: urban Aboriginal People", 2003. Ottawa, Government of Canada, page 31.

¹³ Idem p. 32



Living in the city and still being Aboriginal

Native Friendship Centres work at rebuilding public spaces for sharing and discussing that are found practically nowhere else, neither within the non-Aboriginal community nor in the communities. These sharing and discussion circles allow urban Aboriginal people to finally be heard. Native Friendship Centres thus become places that narrow the gap between the city and the community, between the urban area and the territories. Responding to the increasingly expressed will of Aboriginal people to assert and empower themselves, Friendship Centres created democratic forums and public places where Aboriginal identity can be expressed in an urban environment. These public places are occupied by men, women, youth, children and elders originating from various Aboriginal nations. Together they form diversified and cosmopolitan Aboriginal communities who believe in their survival and who struggle, in solidarity with their people.

Although 48% of First Nations people in Canada (37% in Québec) live off reserve, they are under-represented in the democratic institutions, whether it be in First Nations governments or their regional bodies or federal and provincial governments and agencies. In the medium and long term, this under-representation feeds a democratic deficit likely to increasingly and adversely affect the Aboriginal institutions' legitimacy and cause new forms of political instability. In certain cases, the implicit exclusion of off-reserve people even incurs the risk of affecting the validity of land claims negotiations and subsequent settlements and treaties. The reality experienced by members living in the communities affects that of the members living in the cities and vice-versa.

Even when living in cities, Aboriginal citizens need to maintain healthy relations with their community of origin in order to enjoy the same rights as their fellow citizens, have access to the territory and have the opportunity to share their expertise with the community, obtain the services they are entitled to from their Band Council and Aboriginal public service, etc. In this context, maintaining a distinction between on- and off-reserve Aboriginal citizens is detrimental to those living in urban centres. It is in the interest of all to reduce these divisive factors and reinforce our solidarity. We need innovative solutions to gather our strengths and promote complementarity.

Native Friendship Centres in Québec work at promoting democratic values and supporting the meaningful exercise of active citizenship by off-reserve Aboriginal people, and reinforcing Aboriginal identity in a changing and modern context.



Urban Aboriginal People: New Issues, New Challenges

Knowing that First Nations face complex political, economic, cultural and social issues, the urban dimension represents an additional challenge for Aboriginal leaders. Consequently, as leaders have to carry out onerous responsibilities to foster their communities' healthy development, the urban issue has long been relegated to a position of secondary importance. Furthermore, the ambiguity of government responsibility and jurisdiction is also an obstacle to the improvement of the quality of life of urban Aboriginal citizens. Unfortunately, because of this situation, urban Aboriginal people end up sitting between two chairs, that of the federal government and that of the province.

Under the *Constitution Act of 1867*, the "*Indians and lands reserved for the Indians*" fall under the exclusive federal jurisdiction. The federal jurisdiction applies to individuals registered under the "*Indian Act*" regime as well as to the Inuit. Now, the federal government says that this same *Constitution Act of 1867* authorises it to manage Aboriginal affairs but does not force it to assume responsibility for them. In other words, the government claims that it can choose whether to exercise its jurisdiction or not. The federal government has generally decided to carry out its responsibility for registered Indians living on reserve, giving to understand that Aboriginal people, including off-reserve registered Indians, fall under provincial jurisdiction.

Still according to the *Constitution Act*, the provinces are granted exclusive legislative powers in various areas, including education, health, public security, natural resource management, etc. The confusion on who is responsible in urban and off-reserve areas is due to the overlapping of the federal jurisdiction over "*Indians and Lands reserved for the Indians*" and the various provincial jurisdictions. Despite the fact that obvious changes are happening in cities with an increasing inflow of Aboriginal people, the federal and provincial governments continue to deny their responsibility in this area. What are the consequences for urban Aboriginal people in Québec? First, there are no consistent and wide-ranging policies and programs in Québec. Second, the lack of research on the reality of urban Aboriginal people and the lack of knowledge by competent authorities prevent the organisation of appropriate services and resources for Aboriginal people in the cities. Finally, this failure to assume responsibility may compromise harmony in those cities with an increasing Aboriginal population. It is now time in Québec to promote awareness, to perform an extended diagnosis of the issues and challenges facing urban Aboriginal people and to act in close cooperation with the main people concerned.



The federal and provincial governments must set aside the jurisdictional conflicts and collaborate in implementing services that are adapted to the needs of urban Aboriginal citizens. Who will manage to break the deadlock?

This context creates serious consequences for Aboriginal people coping with the urban reality. More often than not, urban Aboriginal people in Québec have been forgotten or ignored. Despite their increasing number and despite the fact that they experience serious difficulties in coping with a new social environment, urban Aboriginal people did not justify the attention of the different authorities concerned. As mentioned above, there is not comprehensive and systematic approach to policies for urban Aboriginal people in Québec and Canada. This is due, on one hand, to governments refusing to assume primary responsibility for policies designed for urban Aboriginal people and, on the other hand, the lack of political strategies and actions in favour of urban Aboriginal people. On their part, Aboriginal people in the cities feel an urgent need to gather their own information about themselves to ensure that the policies implemented for them are fair, adequate and meet their needs. Aboriginal people should be able to exercise their rights and assert their identity regardless of where they live.

Urban Aboriginal People: a Claimed Identity

In addition to the jurisdictional ambiguity concerning urban Aboriginal people, another factor complicates the implementation of policies, programs and services adapted to these populations: the lack of efficient political representation.

In a way, the lack or absence of representation is not surprising. According to the experts:

*"(...) the absence of effective urban Aboriginal political and policy voices (...) is to a great extent understandable, since urban Aboriginal people are far from homogeneous groups. Since so many cultures and identities are represented in urban settings, it is not surprising when representation is contested or absent."*¹⁴

The national Aboriginal organisations' claims to represent urban Aboriginal people are both contradictory and conflicting. In this regard, researcher Calvin Hanselmann, a specialist in urban Aboriginal issues in Canada, states that:

"This is the case (contradictions and conflicts) when the Assembly of First Nations claims to represent all First Nations people (including those living off-reserve), the

¹⁴ Hanselmann, Calvin. Ensuring the Urban Dream: Shared Responsibility and Effective Urban Aboriginal Voices. In "Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal People", 2003. Ottawa, Government of Canada, page 189.



Métis National Council purports to speak for all Métis people (including those living in urban centres), and the Inuit Kanatami asserts that it is the voice of the Inuit (regardless of residential location) – all at the same time that the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples claims to represent the interests of all off-reserve Aboriginal people... ”¹⁵

A legitimate political representation mandate stems from the grassroots level. To this end, we need to re-establish discussion and debate forums to allow off-reserve First Nations members to be heard. It is risky to claim to represent First Nations, Inuit and Métis members as a large majority of off-reserve Aboriginal people cannot have their voice heard in the political processes.

In the last few years, it appeared obvious that a shift was initiated towards the recognition of a third order of government, that of the First Nations. The signing of the *Paix des Braves* agreement between the Québec government and the Cree nation in 2002, the conclusion of a treaty with the Nisga’a First Nation in British Columbia in 2000 as well as the recognition of the Inuit government authority in Nunavut are but a few recent examples. Furthermore, the Supreme Court of Canada recently rendered decisions on issues directly affecting the rights of urban Aboriginal people. Let us mention the Corbière decision concerning the voting right of off-reserve status Indians, or the Pawley decision that states that Section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which prescribes equality for all, applies to the notion of residency. These important decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada have triggered a debate on the urban issue that has been long awaited by the Native Friendship Centres movement in Canada and Québec.

The transfer of responsibilities and management of many programs to First Nation authorities by the federal government reflects this increasing recognition of a third order of government in Canada. Until very recently, services to off-reserve members were not addressed in negotiations. In Québec, the first time urban services for Aboriginal people represented a challenge for First Nations authorities was when the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreement was signed. To this end, decision-making and accountability mechanisms were established by the Assembly of First of Québec and Labrador (AFNQL) to administer the urban strategy for human resources development. Following review by RCAAQ, the latter raised important concerns regarding these decision-making and financial management mechanisms. RCAAQ considered these mechanisms as restrictive as they had been developed from a “community” perspective, i.e. based on a homogenous population living on reserve. Now, since their foundation, Native Friendship Centres have always advocated for a culturally inclusive approach and an open-door policy; this

¹⁵ Idem.



means that no distinction is made regarding the nation of origin, language or residency. Native Friendship Centres' programs and services are designed to be accessible to all. Thus, the decision-making and accountability mechanisms developed by the First Nations' structures were incompatible with our approach based on equity, respect and universality of services in urban areas.

If the take-over model for First Nations, Inuit and Métis human resources development in Québec becomes the only way of doing business, there is reason for concern. To make sure that all First Nation citizens in urban centres receive quality services that are culturally sensitive, accessible to all, equitable and adequately funded, governments and Aboriginal authorities will need to demonstrate flexibility, openness and trust towards existing service organisations such as Native Friendship Centres. They will also need to recognise that the organisation of urban services, their funding and accountability mechanisms differ from those in the communities.

The First Nations authorities' point of view is that they have jurisdiction over all their members, regardless of where they live. Of course, this position is understandable from a political perspective, but what about the actual situation? In a document submitted to the Assembly of First Nations' Renewal Commission in November 2004, AFNQL states that:

*"In general, the AFNQL believes that the delivery of services to members living in the city should come under First Nations communities."*¹⁶

The interdependence of First Nations governments and Québec Native Friendship Centres requires that we seriously address the meaning of this relationship and that we develop new mechanisms for dialogue and co-management with a view to maximising all citizens' well-being. Far from claiming to replace First Nations' political authorities, Native Friendship Centres act as an additional support to band councils when dealing with their urban members. However, unlike the communities, Native Friendship Centres cannot rely on land and resources to assume this responsibility. Québec Native Friendship Centres adopted an active advocacy role with a view to influencing policy directions concerning the organisation of services in urban areas. We are of the opinion that a nation that offers services only to its resident members and not to all its members recognises its limited powers and uses a rather restrictive definition of the notion of citizenship. And this is why we strongly advocate for urban services issue to be part and parcel of the general framework that will define truly self-governing Aboriginal peoples.

¹⁶ Document submitted to the AFN Renewal Commission by the AFNQL, November 11, 2004, page 26



In Québec, since 1992, the AFNQL Chiefs have expanded the circle and included the voice of women, youth and urban Aboriginal people around their table. Thus, Québec Native Women (QNW), the Regroupement des Centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec and the First Nations of Québec and Labrador Youth Council (AFNQLYC) each appoint a representative to sit at the AFNQL table. Thus, RCAAQ has a non-voting seat, with right to speak, at the Chiefs table. This expanded AFNQL circle is specific to the Québec region. In May 2005, AFNQL and RCAAQ formalised this relation by signing an *Agreement of Relations* recognising RCAAQ as the privileged interlocutor on First Nation urban issues in Québec. This partnership established throughout the years between First Nations leaders and the Regroupement des Centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec has helped develop a better knowledge and mutual respect. Of course, we had to make our way in, one step at a time, explain our positions and demonstrate that one's experience can benefit others. Today, RCAAQ is perceived by First Nations authorities and their regional structures as an expert and a necessary voice on urban Aboriginal issues in Québec.

We believe that our active involvement in AFNQL has significantly contributed to promote the political, social and economic issues related to urban Aboriginal people in Québec. Native Friendship Centres offer many solutions to a situation affecting Aboriginal people but also to the Québec society. Native Friendship Centres can play a role as a catalyst of ideas, a mediator, an agent of political change and citizens involvement.

Urban Aboriginal people need a voice that can carry their issues and challenges to the political arena, hear their demands and thus meet their constantly evolving needs. Organisations such as Native Friendship Centres and their provincial and national associations are valuable resources for Aboriginal leaders seeking to keep contact with their members in the cities. Of course, for a successful dialogue to happen, stakeholders must demonstrate openness, responsiveness and mutual trust.

The Challenge of Cohabitation

The growing presence of Aboriginal people in urban areas inevitably triggers changes in the relations between citizens. Change is not easy to understand and accept. The significant increase of the Aboriginal presence causes discomfort, uneasiness and even rejection within the general population. In the past, people were more or less concerned by the presence of Aboriginal people in the cities as the latter were only transiting visitors in the city. But Aboriginal people have now become urban citizens experiencing a different reality, with their own specific needs and demands.



The leaders of these cities are faced with an unusual challenge: make their city a friendly and welcoming place that is open to "otherness". The Aboriginal citizens of these cities also have an important challenge to address: that of actively participating in the city's social change.

How can we work towards an ideal city? First, by accepting the new face of our changing cities. We must accept the fact that Aboriginal people, steadily increasing, are not silent observers anymore. They are citizens in the city who contribute not only to its economic growth but also to its social and cultural development. The cities' future can no longer be considered without taking into account this population segment. In Val-d'Or, the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) and the Cégep have understood that Aboriginal people represent a development potential not only for their institution but also for their own long term viability. However, these educational institutions are also aware that to achieve their objectives, they must develop a close partnership with Aboriginal people.

Now, we must not fall into the trap of *political correctness*. We cannot accept only what suits us! Social change in a city requires a strong determination by the whole community to meet the many challenges inherent to this new reality. For some people, First Nations, Métis and Inuit certainly represent a profitable business opportunity, and for others, they are seen as a costly social burden. But in any event, Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people have to live together on the same territory and in the same city. We need to initiate a true dialogue, put the cards on the table and design a win-win societal project.

As for us First Nations citizens, we need to better convey our social, economic, cultural and political realities to the non Aboriginal community. Our contribution can only promote a better understanding of who we are, where we come from and what we want for ourselves. Through continued dialogue, we will overcome the prejudices stemming from a disregard of "otherness".

In 2006, in Québec, we are faced with the following choice: accepting this cohabitation that contributes to enhanced relations or refuse it by adopting a "don't care" attitude or worst, a degrading and racist attitude. Let us be straightforward, realistic but above all sincere and honest in our actions and relations. It is our individual and collective responsibility to act in order to positively contribute to this social change.

For 30 years now, Native Friendship Centres in Québec have been working at bridging the gap between peoples. Native Friendship Centres devote relentless efforts to maintain dialogue, discussion and openness to others. Based on our experience, we can confirm that social change in the cities is actually under



way. It must however be carried by all, Aboriginal and non Aboriginal, in order to materialise in equity and justice for all.



Québec's Native Friendship Centres Network

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