

It's time for us to work together with our Aboriginal neighbours

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If someone asked you to describe all the important relationships in your life - to people, places, even to organizations and institutions - where would the federal government rank? For most of us, the government would not even make the list. And yet when it comes to the circumstances and opportunities of first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, many Canadians assume aboriginal leaders and the federal government are the only ones with a role to play.

Certainly, the government has responsibilities toward aboriginal people. But so do businesses, colleges and universities, non-profit organizations, foundations and citizens. Most aboriginal people in Canada are living where most of us live: in cities. According to the recently released Environics Institute's Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study, the aspirations of urban aboriginals are broadly similar to those of the average Canadian: a good education, a good family, a good job, a good life.

What can individuals and organizations in Canada do to engage this large, young and rapidly growing population?

Perhaps the first step is to simply look around. According to the 2006 census, Winnipeg has 68,380 aboriginal inhabitants, Edmonton 52,105, Calgary 26,575, Vancouver 40,310, and Toronto 26,575. These are cities within cities, the largest concentration in history of aboriginal peoples in what is now known as Canada. Can we begin to imagine what we might create together in these multicultural cities?

Another good step would be for non-aboriginal Canadians to set aside some of their outdated stereotypes about aboriginal people. Here are three common myths the evidence has exposed as false:

Myth #1: Aboriginal people mostly live in remote communities.

This is a reality for many, but the 2006 census found the majority of aboriginal people live in cities. Moreover, nine in 10 like their cities and seven in 10 see the city where they currently live as home. They are as likely as non-aboriginal city-dwellers to say they feel capable of personally making their city a better place to live in. Aboriginal people's relationships with their urban communities are neither shallow nor transient.

Myth #2: Aboriginal people have free access to postsecondary education, but do not aspire to this kind of achievement.

When the study asked aboriginal people about their aspirations for themselves and their children, education emerged as the top priority. What is the biggest barrier to higher

education in the eyes of urban aboriginals? Cost, overwhelmingly. Across groups (students, graduates and aspiring students), financial constraints were named as the single biggest threat to achieving their educational goals. Postsecondary education for aboriginal students is not free - this myth goes hand in hand with the myth that aboriginals do not pay taxes. (They do.)

Myth #3: Aboriginal people need to set aside their traditional cultures and identities in order to succeed in contemporary society.

Dead wrong: Urban aboriginals say that having a strong sense of their own culture and identity is a precondition of - not a barrier to - a successful, fulfilling life. Although urban aboriginals express strong pride in and commitment to their cultures, those who say they are concerned about losing their cultures are in the minority: 17 per cent say they are very concerned, 21 per cent somewhat concerned. In other words, urban aboriginal people have a sense of confidence about the cultural vitality of their urban communities, and they are likely to be open to, not fearful of, the creative collisions that define diverse cities.

The study that gathered these findings is just one example of a project aimed at sparking dialogue about how first nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples might chart their futures in the century to come. Non-aboriginal Canadians, businesses, community organizations and institutions can play a role. Does your corporation have HR policies that recruit and retain aboriginal employees? Is the marketing department courting them? Does your community organization partner with aboriginal organizations? Does your alma mater reach out to prospective aboriginal students and offer them support once they enroll?

Urban aboriginal people are aspiring, striving and achieving in cities across Canada. Ensuring they are met with fairness, opportunity and support is a job for government, but not only for government. After 400 years, is it not time we got started on a better path together? It is a job for all of us.

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