



Institute for  
Research on  
Public Policy  
Institut de  
recherche  
en politiques  
publiques

For immediate distribution  
November 28, 2006

## NEWS RELEASE

### *40 Years of Talk and Study Have Done Little to Improve the Quality of Life of Aboriginal People*

*Absent new approaches to problem solving and real political commitment little is likely to change, says Daniel Salée*

**Montreal** – For 40 years governments and researchers have produced studies that examine the problems facing Canada's Aboriginal people. However, despite this massive body of work, their socio-economic conditions have not greatly improved. As the IRPP study being released today argues, real change for the better is unlikely absent political will.

Author Daniel Salée (Concordia University) contends that to succeed where Canada has so far failed, policy debates must transcend old questions. Specifically, researchers and policy makers must get past whether claims of distinctiveness and self-determination isolate Aboriginal people from the prosperity of mainstream society, or whether their differences necessitate greater autonomy. Even if this could be done, the best intentions and all the knowledge in the world will not result in tangible improvements without real political commitment, says the author. His work is a forceful reminder that the time has come to employ new approaches to tackle the persistent problems affecting Aboriginal quality of life.

To provide some needed clarity to the discussion, Salée divides the literature on Aboriginal quality of life into four main categories and analyses the drawbacks of each:

**Facts, Figures and the State:** This approach uses quantitative methods to study socio-economic problems and issues facing Aboriginal people. Its goal, says Salée, is more about painting a picture than prescribing solutions. Among the author's critiques of this strain of research is that Aboriginal quality of life is often examined on the basis of "Eurocentric notions of well-being."

**Social Cohesion, Social Capital and Capacity-Building:** This vein of literature assumes that social cohesion is a precondition for prosperity and that Aboriginal people suffer from a breakdown in social cohesion. The way to remedy this, say proponents, is to build greater capacity among Aboriginal communities. Salée contends that this perspective "downplays the influence of structures of power and patterns of social relations" that affects the plight of Aboriginal people.

**Therapy of Self -- Personal Healing, Psychological Recovery and Individual Transformation:** This category "directly links issues of Aboriginal well-being with the various and frequent manifestations of individual behavioural and biological dysfunction," says Salée. Based on this view, improvements to quality of life stem from individuals behaving in manners that promote collective and individual well-being. Like the social cohesion category, this literature tends to downplay the influence of relations of power between groups, argues the author.

**White Man's Burden -- Aboriginal Policy, Individual Rights and Equality:** The small but influential group of authors who have taken this approach are uncomfortable with the claims for Aboriginal self-government. They argue that, promoting greater detachment of Aboriginal people from mainstream society is inadvertently, but adversely, affecting the quality of life of Aboriginal people. Salée critiques these writings as "essentially concerned that the legitimization of an Aboriginal civic and cultural identity that would not fully correspond to Canada's own would threaten the institutional coherence and civic cohesiveness of the Canadian political community."

Public policies, argues the author, must go beyond old debates about whether Aboriginal people are best served by being autonomous, self-governing actors on the one hand, or fully integrated into non-Aboriginal society on the other. Salée also contends that a good deal of the policy research in this area insufficiently acknowledges the fundamentally political nature of the subject. Moreover, few authors have seriously tackled the reasons why, by most measures, the socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal people remain less favourable than those of non-Aboriginals. In the end, "it all boils down to one inescapable reality," says Salée: "significant improvements to Aboriginal quality of life hinge on a fundamental, genuine and widespread political commitment to social change and social justice for Aboriginal people."

"Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in Canada: An Analysis of Current Research," by Daniel Salée, can be downloaded free of charge from [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org)

"Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in Canada: An Analysis of Current Research" is the first publication in IRPP's new research program, Aboriginal Quality of Life. Directed by F. Leslie Seidle, IRPP Senior Research Associate, this program will lead to a series of studies examining recent innovations in public policies, programs and partnerships in a number of policy sectors that are particularly relevant to Aboriginal people. The studies will be situated within the broader context of the quality of life of Aboriginal people, including historical and constitutional factors.

- 30 -

For more information or to request an interview, please contact the IRPP.

To receive the Institute's monthly newsletter via e-mail, please subscribe to the IRPP e-distribution service by visiting its Web site, at [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org).

Founded in 1972, the Institute for Research in Public Policy (IRPP.org) is an independent, national, nonprofit organization based in Montreal.

**Contact:**

Jackson Wightman ([jwightman@irpp.org](mailto:jwightman@irpp.org))

Director of Communications (IRPP)

Office: (514) 985-2461, ext. 324

Cellular: (514) 235-8308