

1



## Introduction

We have something they do not know about — we have our teachings, our value systems, our attitudes, our clan systems and on and on and on....Let's educate them.

Right now, they think they do not want to know about us. They look at us in a mystical way. They think we worship smoke. They think we are in a dream world. They fund us so they can continue to look at us as unreal. They educated us to a point where we almost forgot who we are. Now it is time we educate them, people to people.

We are different. We have a different perspective on life and all creation. We have many wonderful things to share. We have different and wonderful teachings to share that are simple to live by, reasonable, sensible, for the good of all within the community, full of respect. These have remained a mystery to mankind until now.

Merle Assance-Beedie  
Orillia, Ontario  
14 May 1993

**ONE OF THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING** the goals and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is recognizing their diversity. Aboriginal people do not constitute a monolithic entity, speaking with one voice through one designated leader. The term is broad, embracing a variety of cultural traditions and social experience. There are differences not only between First Nations, Inuit and Métis people but also among First Nations.

Beyond the cultural distinctions, Aboriginal people of the various nations have differing experiences of life in this country. There are those born and raised in remote or isolated communities, living according to the traditions of their forebears. Others live in the heart of Canada's largest cities, surrounded by a multitude of cultural influences. Our hearings showed that Aboriginal youth have different priorities from those of Aboriginal elders and Aboriginal women. The fact that priorities differ does not necessarily mean there is conflict among these groups. Rather, each experience of life in Canada gives rise to a different set of issues and concerns, problems and solutions.

Our mandate was written with this diversity in mind. Our terms of reference instruct us to look at the position and role of Aboriginal women under existing social conditions and legal arrangements and in the future; the position and role of Aboriginal elders; the

situation of Aboriginal youth; the constitutional and legal position of Métis people and First Nations people living off-reserve; and the difficulties specific to Aboriginal people who live in the North. Our task was also to study and make concrete recommendations to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal people living in cities.

In this volume, our goal is to give voice to the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and the diversity of the Aboriginal experience in Canada. We do this by highlighting their various perspectives and by showing how the issues identified in our mandate appear from these perspectives.

By 'perspective' we mean the way individuals see themselves in relation to the world around them and the issues that come to matter to those individuals. A perspective provides a particular insight into the relative importance of things, shaped by experience. It is a world view and, as such, transcends single, specific issues. A perspective provides the framework through which an individual approaches all issues.

The perspectives we identify come from careful listening to the many people who spoke to us. The distinct voices that emerge are those of Aboriginal women, elders, youth, Métis people, people living in the North, and Aboriginal people living in urban areas. The careful reader will realize that, even within these perspectives, there is diversity of opinion. Groups are made up of individuals, and individuals do not always agree. Where there is a range of opinion, we try to provide the spectrum. Our task here is to answer these questions: What matters most to this group? Why does it matter? And what should be done to address these concerns?

We are not simply regrouping issues and recommendations from preceding volumes. Our intent is to provide another dimension to the issues. Where appropriate, we direct readers to other chapters or volumes for a more detailed discussion of specific issues. In all chapters in this volume, the major themes arise from what was said at the hearings, what emerged from the briefs we received from groups and individuals across the country, and what our research program revealed. Where appropriate, we offer recommendations.

## **1. Women's Perspectives**

We have been told by Aboriginal people that all things — creation, life — begin with women. All the issues mentioned in our terms of reference have a fundamental impact on women, and women are involved in all the perspectives identified here. We place their perspective at the beginning of this volume.

The concerns of Aboriginal women are an integral part of our approach to every area of our mandate and thus can be found throughout our report and other Commission documents. Here we focus specifically on issues of importance raised by Aboriginal women and the problems and the solutions they identified. The need for healing is a recurring theme for Aboriginal women. Healing will bring about the full inclusion of Aboriginal women in all areas of Aboriginal society. For many Aboriginal women and,

indeed, for many Aboriginal people, healing is a necessary first step in rebuilding their nations.

## **2. Elders' Perspectives**

The elders represent another way of seeing the world. Their perspective and their understanding of Canada have much to contribute to discussions of future relationships in this country.

Elders in Aboriginal communities are those recognized and respected for knowing, living and teaching the traditional knowledge. They see the world through the eyes of the ancestors and interpret the contemporary world through lessons passed down through generations. Their wisdom is transferred to young people who seek their teachings. The elders are a living bridge between the past and the present. They also provide a vision for the future, a vision grounded in tradition and informed by the experience of living on the land, safeguarding and disseminating knowledge gained over centuries.

Elders have much to contribute in the quest for self-determination and a better relationship among all Canadians. They are educators in the broadest sense of the word. In all areas of our mandate — from health to education, from justice to lands and resources — there is a place for the elders.

The elders are willing to share if we are willing to listen. We hope to do justice to their words.

## **3. Youth Perspectives**

Aboriginal youth are in the unique position of coping with the legacies of a colonial past while keeping a hopeful eye on the future — their future.

More than half of all Aboriginal people in Canada are under the age of 25. Our recommendations are forward-looking, often intended for the long term. It is youth who will take the necessary steps to renew the relationship between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. At present, their circumstances give cause for concern — too many youth are dropping out of school, attempting and committing suicide, abusing substances. These youth must struggle to find a place for themselves as Aboriginal people in the modern world. Some have been victims of physical, sexual or psychological abuse; all have experienced the effects of systemic racism. We have been told of instances where the youth of a community have tried to take the initiative, only to find themselves excluded in the development of decisions that directly affect their lives.

But youth have demonstrated incredible resilience in the face of these obstacles. They have sustained their hope and their drive to ensure a better future for themselves and their communities.

More and more young people are gaining a strong sense of pride as Aboriginal people. They want to learn their peoples' traditional values, beliefs and practices and to have a say in their future. They tell us that programs and initiatives developed for them without their input have not worked and never will. Aboriginal youth are looking for empowerment, and in many ways, they are beginning to empower themselves.

#### **4. Métis Perspectives**

There are profound and persistent misunderstandings about Métis people, misunderstandings that extend to both the identity of Métis people and their rights as Aboriginal people. In some cases, they have even been subject to misunderstanding or rejection by other Aboriginal people.

We believe that in presenting Métis perspectives we can contribute to greater public awareness and understanding of Métis people and their aspirations. Their life experience in Canada, politically and socially, is markedly different from that of First Nations and Inuit. Their rights, ignored and abused for generations, are in urgent need of recognition and restoration.

As one of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, Métis people want to be recognized as having their own unique cultural and political traditions. They are seeking nation-to-nation relationships with Canada. As with other Aboriginal peoples, land and self-determination are central issues. Métis people are seeking to build their own institutions and organizations based on the foundation of their culture.

#### **5. Northern Perspectives**

The North is a unique area of Canada — not just geographically but politically and socially as well — as a region where Aboriginal people often constitute a majority. Across the North, Aboriginal people make up a large enough proportion of the population to exert a strong political influence.

Apart from a few scattered wage employment centres, Aboriginal ways of earning a living, of making decisions and of using the environment have influenced the non-Aboriginal people who have come to the North. Together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal northerners have developed distinctive forms of governance based on Aboriginal and European traditions. They face distinct economic and environmental challenges. In our chapter on the North, we explain what is different about northern Canada and offer some recommendations concerning the challenges unique to northern Aboriginal peoples.

We address specific issues of concern to Inuit. All their communities are in the North, yet Inuit also live beyond Canadian borders. They are part of a larger circumpolar population, with relations in Russia, Alaska and Greenland. They are people of the North, an area that has shaped their culture and perspective.

In some instances, Inuit share the same struggles confronting all Aboriginal peoples in Canada. But their historical relationship with Canada is different from that of First Nations and Métis peoples, giving rise to their own unique issues. Too often policies developed to meet the needs of other Aboriginal peoples have been applied to Inuit, sometimes with devastating consequences. Inuit are involved in major political developments in northern Canada, such as the creation of the new territory of Nunavut in the eastern Northwest Territories, Nunavik in northern Quebec, and the implementation of self-government for the Inuvialuit in the western Arctic. Inuit wish to move forward without losing sight of the past, of their history, language and culture.

For some, the North is merely a matter of geography. We have found that it is also a distinct social, political and cultural terrain.

## **6. Urban Perspectives**

The migration of Aboriginal people to urban centres is a relatively recent phenomenon. Today, about half of all Aboriginal people live in cities or towns. The urbanization of Aboriginal people raises significant policy issues. Yet the issues of rural, band-based First Nations have dominated the public debate and allocation of financial resources since the beginning of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments.

Some urban Aboriginal people feel caught between two worlds. They are physically and socially removed from their Aboriginal communities and unrecognized in their urban neighbourhoods. The issues confronting urban Aboriginal people — governance, access to culturally appropriate services, cultural identity and intercultural relationships — have been woefully neglected by Canadian governments and Aboriginal authorities in the past.

Many Aboriginal people in urban areas want to live in a way that allows them to understand and express their culture. In the chapter on urban perspectives, we focus on the most pressing issues facing urban Aboriginal people and offer recommendations to address these concerns.

We hope this volume will give non-Aboriginal readers an appreciation and understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal perspectives and experience in Canada. We want to make it clear why we are a royal commission on Aboriginal 'peoples', not Aboriginal 'people'. Recognizing this plurality is the first step toward understanding who Aboriginal peoples are and what their visions are for the future.

We hope Aboriginal readers will see something of themselves reflected in these pages, that they will hear echoes of the voices of brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers, and, equally important, that voices will emerge that they had not heard before, voices of those who have travelled different paths.

Aboriginal people told the Commission that all of us — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal — can learn from one another. We must bridge the gap between peoples of different nations and different traditions, using the building blocks of understanding, empathy and

respect. With this volume, we hope to create a foundation of understanding upon which to renew that relationship.