Aboriginal Peoples and Poverty in Canada:
Can Provincial Governments Make a Difference?

Alain Noël
Florence Larocque
Département de science politique
Université de Montréal

On November 25, 2005, in Kelowna, British Columbia, the federal, provincial and territorial governments and representatives from all the major Aboriginal organizations in the country concluded an eighteen-month negotiation process with a consensus on a ten-year approach to close the standard of living gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Patterson, 2006). The federal government, led by Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, promised to devote $5.1 billion over five years to improve relationships and accountability, access to education, health services, housing, and economic opportunities. Most importantly, all governments agreed that any progress along this road would require collaboration and mutual respect, and accepted that "Aboriginal peoples need the capacity to more effectively participate and contribute to the development of policies, programs and services that affect them." Multilateral regional processes and regular pan-Canadian forums for the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit were planned to make this new partnership effective (First Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders, 2005a). Many leaders spoke of an historic turn, which would at last contribute to reduce Aboriginal poverty (First Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders, 2005b).

A few months later, Paul Martin's government was defeated, and a new minority government headed by Conservative Stephen Harper took power. Although it never openly disavowed the Kelowna process, the Harper government soon made clear that it would not spend at the level pledged in Kelowna to improve the quality of life of

Aboriginal peoples. In fact, for the new Conservative Indian Affairs minister, Jim Prentice, there never even was a genuine, signed Accord in Kelowna, and his government could not be bound by a last-minute pre-election deal that amounted to little more than a "one-page press release" (CBC News Online, 2006; Webster, 2006). Aboriginal leaders and provincial and territorial Premiers insisted repeatedly on the need to respect a truly remarkable consensus, which had rallied all relevant parties and promised a coherent approach to attack poverty in Aboriginal communities, but to no avail (Gordon, 2008).

Two ideological obstacles made a Conservative reversal on Kelowna unlikely. First, despite repeated pressures to that effect, the Harper government did not believe it was the role of the federal government to design an explicit, coherent poverty reduction policy framework, either for Aboriginal peoples or for the majority population. Second, the Conservatives remained suspicious of Aboriginal self-government and reluctant toward new forms of governance that would enhance Aboriginal autonomy and collective capacities.

Consider, first, poverty reduction. Since 2006, many pan-Canadian groups and organizations have called for a comprehensive federal poverty reduction strategy, including the National Council of Welfare, the Canadian Council on Social Development, Campaign 2000, and Canada Without Poverty. The House of Commons and the Senate have also held committee hearings on the question (Noël, 2008; Hay, 2009: 18). Yet, the Conservative government bucked the trend. In its June 2009 response to the recommendations prepared by the United Nations Human Rights Council for its Universal Periodic Review of national human rights practices, the Canadian Government stated explicitly that it did not intend to "develop a national strategy to eliminate poverty" because "provinces and territories have jurisdiction in this area of social policy and have developed their own programs to address poverty," which were adequately supported by existing federal programs (Canadian Heritage, 2009). In the same response, the Harper government did acknowledge a federal responsibility in reducing "inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians," and it outlined a number of initiatives to that

effect, but these were piecemeal and either focused on education and labor market integration or on the very slow process of land claims negotiations, rather than directly on low income and social conditions. No reference was made to a comprehensive process built in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples.

Indeed, in its ignorance of the Kelowna consensus, the Harper government also manifested a strong distrust for any collaborative or empowering process, and a preference for more traditional and vertical bureaucratic relationships with Aboriginal peoples (Abele and Prince, 2008b: 83). Here as well, a recent international gesture appeared telling. In June 2006, the newly elected Harper government was one of only four governments in the world (with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) to vote against the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples prepared by the same United Nations Human Rights Council. Even though he admitted that this Declaration "was not legally binding and had no legal effect in Canada," the Canadian representative to the General Assembly nevertheless insisted that it remained "overly broad, unclear and capable of a wide variety of interpretations," and risked establishing "complete veto power over legislative action for a particular group" (General Assembly, 2006). Up to then, the Canadian government had taken an active role in drafting this declaration, which had the support of its own officials in the departments of Indian Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Defense (Galloway, 2007). The Harper government, however, was not better disposed toward Aboriginal rights than it was toward poverty reduction strategies.

Interestingly, from then on, initiatives came from the provinces, against the expectations of most scholars on the left in Canada, who tend to distrust provincial governments and associate decentralization with "a more unequal Canada" (Banting, 2005: 135). In just a few years, action plans and strategies against poverty were launched or announced by provincial governments in Québec (2004), Newfoundland and Labrador (2006), Ontario (2008), Nova Scotia (2009), Manitoba (2009), and New Brunswick (forthcoming). In parallel, many provincial governments also initiated their own processes to reduce the socio-economic gap between Aboriginal peoples and the majority population. These processes included Saskatchewan's Strategy for Métis and

Off-reserve First Nations People (2001), the tripartite *Transformative Change Accord* and the bilateral *Métis Nation Relationship Accord* in British Columbia (2005), the Mashteuiatsh socioeconomic First Nations forum in Québec (2006), and Ontario's two bilateral agreements with the Métis Nation (2008) and with Treaty 3 First Nations (2009).

The initiatives aimed at Aboriginal peoples, in particular, appear intriguing given the past neglect of provincial governments, which was only partly justified by the division of powers. The constitution grants the federal parliament exclusive legislative authority over "Indians, and Lands reserved for Indians," but the authority for the Inuit, the Métis, and even for Indians off-reserve is largely left unspecified (Hanselmann and Gibbins, 2005: 79). In the past, provincial governments often have acted as if their main objective was to avoid costs and responsibilities that they preferred to leave to Ottawa (Frideres and Gadazc, 2008: 368; Moscovitch and Webster, 1995, sections 3.5-3.6)

Can provincial governments make a difference against Aboriginal poverty? This paper uses the various provincial action plans and strategies against poverty, which contains references to Aboriginal peoples, and recent provincial initiatives regarding Aboriginal quality of life as a vantage point to clarify how in Canada, provincial governments may address, or fail to address, Aboriginal poverty. All in all, the issue is likely to remain at the periphery of provincial social policies, because most provinces still consider that Aboriginal affairs are primarily a federal jurisdiction. Still, in a period of relative federal inaction, provincial initiatives on Aboriginal poverty could be significant, and they could provide telling indications about the nature of changing social policy orientations in the different provinces, and about the broader politics of recognition and multinational governance in the Canadian federation.

A few caveats must be outlined at the outset. First, this paper is very much a work in progress, on a complex, indeed arcane, issue and it requires more research, including interviews with key actors. Second, the federal-provincial politics of social policy regarding Aboriginal peoples has created an intricate patchwork of programs and measures, and we can only paint a broad-brush representation here. Third, we have

deliberately excluded the three northern territories (Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) from the analysis, because they raise distinct issues, given their small populations dispersed over large territories, their much larger Aboriginal components, high cost of living, daunting social problems, and far less autonomous governments. Unlike provinces, territories do not have their own, constitutional jurisdictions, and their financing remains largely provided by the federal government, through various transfers (Expert Panel on Equalization and Territorial Formula Financing, 2006: 18-22; Henderson, 2007: 56-57).

The paper begins with a brief survey of Aboriginal poverty in Canada, followed by a presentation of the complex relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the welfare state. We can then assess provincial strategies as such, to evaluate their nature and their scope, their potential significance, and their political underpinnings.

Aboriginal Poverty in Canada

In Canada, as in many countries, being Aboriginal often means being poor, or even very poor. In 2005, 3.8% of the country's population identified as Aboriginal, either as North American Indians (or First Nations peoples; 60% of the total), Métis (33%) or Inuit (4%).[1] Of these, 21.7% had incomes below Statistics Canada's low income cut-off after tax, compared to 11.1% for the non-Aboriginal identity population (Statistics Canada, 2006a).[2]

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[1] The remaining 3% either identified to more than one sub-group or were registered Indians or members of a First Nation who did not identify as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2008a: 9). Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, which recognizes "the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada" defines the "aboriginal peoples of Canada" as including "the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples" (Canada, 1982*).* Given this constitutional language, the term "Aboriginal" prevails in Canada over "Indigenous," which is more common elsewhere in the world. The two terms are basically equivalent (Papillon, 2009: 423).

[2] To compute these percentages, we have added persons in economic families and not in economic families. Statistics Canada's low income cut-off (LICO) is a Canadian low income measure, which is distinct from the more conventional, and in our opinion

Unemployment explained in part this discrepancy, the employment rate of Aboriginal peoples being almost ten percentage points below that of the non-Aboriginal population (53.7% compared to 62.7% in 2005). But a host of factors also combined to make Aboriginal persons more vulnerable to poverty. Basic education, for instance, was not as likely to be achieved, 43.7% of Aboriginal Canadians having less than a secondary education, compared to 23.1% for the non-Aboriginal population. Living and health conditions also remained well below those of the majority. If one defines a dwelling where there is more than one person per room as crowded, for example, 11.4% of Aboriginal identity persons lived in such housing conditions in 2005, compared to 2.9% for the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2006a). Aboriginal identity persons also had significantly shorter life expectancy, and they faced higher risks of suffering from obesity, from chronic illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure or heart problems, or from infectious diseases like tuberculosis and chlamydia (Canadian Population Health Initiative, 2004: 80-84).

Some progress has been made in recent years, regarding health conditions in particular, but the gap between Aboriginal peoples and the general population remains important. Replicating the methodology used by the United Nations Development Programme to design the Human Development Index — an indicator that integrates life expectancy, educational attainment and income measures — Martin Cooke and his coauthors found that, if they had formed a country, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada would have ranked among the high human development nations in 2001, but only in 32nd place, at a good distance from Canada, which stood among the top ten countries in the world (2007).

In a dispersed and very diverse population, these aggregate results necessarily mask worst situations. In Manitoba, for instance, 28.6% of Aboriginal identity persons had incomes below Statistics Canada's low income cut-off after tax in 2005, a

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more satisfying, median-based low income measures. For recent presentations, see Statistics Canada, 2008b; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008.

preoccupying rate, even compared to that of Aboriginal identity persons elsewhere in the country (21.7%). For Manitoba registered Indians, however, this low income rate rose well beyond the Aboriginal identity level, at 42.3%, and it climbed higher still for registered Indians living in the Winnipeg metropolitan area (50.4%) (Statistics Canada, 2006a).[3] Such data were not available for on-reserve Indians, but according to a report prepared jointly by the Canadian and Manitoba governments, nothing indicated that their situation was any more favorable (Service Canada and Manitoba Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, 2006: 66). The same report specified as well that when they were poor, Aboriginal persons tended to fall far below Statistics Canada's low income cut-off, and to stay there for many years (65). In Manitoba, Aboriginal poverty was particularly prevalent, deep and persistent.

Significant across the country, the Aboriginal poverty gap was indeed most pronounced in the Prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Table 1 presents low income statistics for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in the provinces, and the gap in percentage points between each population.

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[3] See footnote 2.

Table 1: Proportion of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population below Statistics Canada's low income cut off after tax, in Canada and in the provinces, 2005

	Aboriginal identity	Non-Aboriginal	Gap (percentage points)
Nfld and Labrador	12.5%	8.7%	3.8%
P.E.I.	16.2%	6.9%	9.3%
Nova Scotia	15.4%	9.5%	5.9%
New Brunswick	17.5%	9.2%	8.3%
Québec	19.5%	12.5%	7.0%
Ontario	18.4%	11.0%	7.4%
Manitoba	28.6%	10.2%	18.4%
Saskatchewan	28.2%	7.8%	20.4%
Alberta	19.1%	8.6%	10.5%
British Columbia	22.5%	12.8%	9.7%
Canada	21.7%	11.1%	10.6%

Source: Calculated from Statistics Canada, 2006a (see footnote 2 and footnote 4 below).

As many authors have recognized, there is a geographical pattern to the Aboriginal poverty gap, the Prairie provinces displaying by far the most pronounced discrepancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons (Kendall, 2001: 44-46; Mendelson, 2004: 19; and 2006a: 8). In Saskatchewan, for instance, an Aboriginal identity person is about three and a half times more likely to be poor than a non-Aboriginal resident. The pattern is similar with respect to unemployment rates, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Unemployment rate of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population, in Canada and in the provinces, 2005

	Aboriginal identity	Non-Aboriginal	Gap (percentage points)
Nfld and Labrador	30.1%	18.0%	12.1%
P.E.I.	17.3%	11.0%	6.3%
Nova Scotia	15.5%	9.0%	6.5%
New Brunswick	20.8%	9.7%	11.1%
Québec	15.6%	6.9%	8.7%
Ontario	12.3%	6.3%	6.0%
Manitoba	15.4%	4.2%	11.2%
Saskatchewan	18.2%	4.2%	14.0%
Alberta	11.1%	3.9%	7.2%
British Columbia	15.0%	5.6%	9.4%
Canada	14.8%	6.3%	8.5%

Source: Calculated from Statistics Canada, 2006a (see footnote 4 below).

In interpreting these tables, one should keep in mind that the Aboriginal population is much more important in the Prairie provinces, where it represents as much as 15% of the total population. Table 3 presents population statistics for the different provinces, as well as for the three territories, included here to provide additional perspective.

Table 3: Aboriginal identity population in Canada and in the provinces and territories, 2005

	Aboriginal identity population	% of the provincial or territorial population
Nfld and Labrador	23 450	4.7%
P.E.I.	1 730	1.3%
Nova Scotia	24 175	2.7%
New Brunswick	17 655	2.5%
Québec	108 430	1.5%
Ontario	242 495	2.0%
Manitoba	175 395	15.5%
Saskatchewan	141 890	14.9%
Alberta	188 365	5.8%
British Columbia	196 075	4.8%
Yukon	7 580	25.1%
Northwest Territories	20 635	50.3%
Nunavut	24 920	85.0%
Canada	1 172 790	3.8%

Source: Calculated from Statistics Canada, 2006a.[4]

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[4] Some Indians reserves and settlements refused to participate in the Census. Census data are therefore incomplete for certain areas of the country. According to Statistics Canada, however, "for higher-level geographic areas (Canada, provinces, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations) the impact of the missing data is very small" (Statistics Canada, 2006b). For Canada as a whole, for instance, Statistics Canada estimates that the 2006 Census missed 40115 persons because of this difficulty. Their inclusion would make the proportion of persons declaring an Aboriginal identity rise by 0.1%, from 3.8% to 3.9%. In Alberta and Québec, where the problem was most important, this proportion would increase by 0.2%.

Intriguingly, it is in the provinces where they are most present that Aboriginal peoples fare the worst socially and economically. Michael Mendelson associates this situation with higher rates of unemployment, themselves related to higher levels of failure to complete high school (2004: 29; 2006a: 18-19). Mendelson admits, however, that these factors explain only part of the variance, and that they themselves would need to be explained. One possibility is that somewhere above 5% of the population, as in the three Prairie provinces, what Charles Tilly calls mechanisms of categorical inequalities begin to play more forcefully (1998). The recent literature on discrimination, segregation, and poverty pursues this idea with notions of thresholds, tipping points, and traps, to account for the obviously collective dimensions of poverty, which differently affect various social categories, countries, regions or neighborhoods (Bowles, Durlauf and Hoff, 2006). It is not possible, here, to go further in this direction, but it can at least be noted that, with respect to Aboriginal poverty, provincial governments face very different challenges. The "real politics" of Aboriginal poverty, observes Mendelson, is tied to a population distribution that makes the issue much more critical, visible and difficult than elsewhere in the Prairie provinces and, to some extent, in British Columbia (2006a: 2).

In Canada, most of the literature on Aboriginal poverty can be summarized into two streams, one that stresses individual economic factors, and the other collective, socio-cultural circumstances (Salée, 2006: 23). In the first camp are authors, usually on the right, who emphasize the similarities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons, and stress personal socio-economic determinants of poverty. Reluctant to accept Aboriginal difference and the self-government claims it warrants, these authors basically believe that the poverty gap will be eliminated if Aboriginal peoples "acquire the skills and attitudes that bring success in a liberal society, political democracy and market economy" (Flanagan, 2000: 195-96). In a recent book, for instance, John Richards acknowledges the weight of history and the collective nature of Aboriginal poverty, but prefers to focus on individual disadvantages such as insufficient levels of education, because these deficiencies are more likely to be addressed pragmatically and

comprehensively by the federal or provincial governments; Aboriginal nationalism alone, Richards contends, "cannot solve Aboriginal problems" (2006: 127).

Other authors, usually on the left and favorable to Aboriginal self-government, grant more importance to the cultural and political conditions created by an enduring colonial legacy and by a lack of recognition and political autonomy (Abele and Prince, 2008a: 166). Psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer and his coauthors, for instance, emphasize the mental health problems associated with cultural oppression, marginalization and uncontrolled social change, and stress the necessity of community empowerment and cultural renewal, citing as evidence the huge variations that already exist in health outcomes across communities. Ultimately, they conclude, "political efforts to restore Aboriginal rights, settle land claims, and redistribute power through various forms of self-government hold the keys to healthy communities" (Kirmayer, Brass and Tait, 2000: 614).

It is not our purpose, here, to review, let alone evaluate, these contending interpretations. In many ways, they appear complementary, as is suggested by the recent literature on poverty traps. A good case could be made, indeed, for a policy framework that would improve both individual and collective capacities. This is so because, for all their differences, these two approaches remain similar in considering Aboriginal poverty from the standpoint of the poor, taken either as individuals or as communities. In this context, solutions are naturally, and quite appropriately, associated to policies designed to offer better choices or opportunities, to persons or to collectivities.

This paper approaches the issue from a different angle. We start from three premises. First, following Daniel Salée, we emphasize the political nature of Aboriginal poverty, to underline the fact that the poverty gap between Aboriginal peoples and the non-Aboriginal majority is not only attributable to characteristics of individuals and communities, but also to the broader political and institutional arrangements that produce and reproduce positions and advantages in Canadian society (2006: 24).

Second, we seek to move beyond the blanket political statements often found in the literature, which associate poverty with colonialism and racism for instance (Green, 2005; Salée, 2005), to consider the actual state practices that condition Aboriginal life chances. The modern welfare state, aptly observes Gøsta Esping-Andersen, is a "stratification system in its own right" (1990: 4). It creates rights, entitlements, services, and shapes job patterns and household models. Even though they have a peculiar constitutional status, Aboriginal peoples likewise see their fate fashioned, sometimes in unique ways, by the Canadian welfare state (Papillon, 2005). Thus, one cannot understand Aboriginal poverty without paying close attention to the evolving architecture of the social programs delivered by Ottawa and the provinces. Third, in Canada, Aboriginal politics is in flux, and policy outcomes are likely to reflect the evolution of multinational conflicts, in a federation that still has a hard time coming to terms with what Charles Taylor has called deep diversity (1993; Noël, 2006a). Let us turn, then, to welfare state practices.

Aboriginal Life in an Advanced Welfare State

The construction of the modern welfare state was an exercise in citizenship. To borrow from Jane Jenson, who built on T. H. Marshall, creating the welfare state also meant putting in place a new citizenship regime, an arrangement through which the state could recognize and address, or not, the claims of citizens for rights and benefits (Jenson, 1997). When this happened in Canada, however, Aboriginal peoples were hardly recognized as citizens.

Indians, in particular, were explicitly denied citizenship. Following the 1876 *Indian Act,* they were treated as "wards or children of the state," unable to be enfranchised until they had "ceased to follow the Indian mode of life" (Department of the Interior Annual Report, 1876, quoted in Papillon, 2008: 95; and Arthur Meighen, then Minister of the Interior and Superintendant of Indian Affairs, to the House of Commons in 1918, quoted in Cairns, 2000: 49). Until 1960, Indians could not vote and were not allowed to drink, they faced major constraints preventing them from owning land, a business or even a

house, experienced widespread discrimination, and saw many of their cultural or traditional practices forbidden (Coates, 2000: 74-75). The official policy was to "protect" Indians to give them time to assimilate gradually into the majority. In this perspective, social benefits and services could be provided, but more as instruments of assimilation than as rights (Shewell, 2004: ix-x). The Poor Law relief system, not the welfare state, then inspired social policy toward Indians, and until the introduction of universal family allowances in 1945, relief came mostly from the provision by the Department of Indian Affairs of in-kind rations to the most destitute (Moscovitch and Webster, 1995: sections 1.3 and 3.3; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996: volume 2, chapter 5, section 2.9).

The situation was different for the Métis and the Inuit, who were not covered by the *Indian Act*, and were thus treated more or less as regular citizens, without recognition of their difference. For the Métis, observed Alan Cairns, this general policy could be termed "assimilation by neglect" (2000: 49). Indeed, Métis faced discrimination and marginalization, and they were often caught between two worlds. In a period when municipalities administered social assistance programs, the Métis, who mostly lived in unincorporated areas, rarely had access to conventional relief and they were not entitled either to federal in-kind relief, which was limited to Indians (Moscovitch and Webster, 1995: section 3.2). As for the Inuit, the policy seemed "simply neglect" (Cairns, 2000: 49). Far remote from the inhabited areas of the country, the Inuit were largely ignored by governments, which provided at best marginal services and practically no relief programs (Moscovitch and Webster, 1995: section 3.2; Abele, 2004: 16).

The emergence of a welfare state premised on universality after the Second World War transformed the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the state. The first major federal transfer program, associated with the *Old Age Pension Act* in 1927, explicitly excluded Indians from receiving benefits. Likewise, the first large-scale social insurance, the 1940 unemployment insurance program, denied protection, in practice, to most Aboriginal persons because it did not cover seasonal workers or those involved in agriculture, forestry, logging, fishing, hunting and trapping, and transportation (Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996: volume 2, chapter 5, section 2.9). With the introduction of universal family allowances in 1945, Aboriginal peoples were for the first time incorporated, at least in part, within the regular citizenship regime. A similar logic prevailed for pensions in 1951, for disability benefits in 1954 and, later, for other social programs (Buckley, 1992: 76-77).

The key breakthrough came with the reform of social assistance in the 1960s, which profoundly transformed the relationship between Aboriginal communities and the state. Under the 1966 Canada Assistance Plan, the federal government accepted to pay half of a province's social assistance costs, as long as certain conditions were respected regarding access, including regular coverage for all Aboriginal persons, except Indians currently or in the previous year on reserves, which remained a federal responsibility. All provinces reformed their social assistance along these lines, and the Department of Indian Affairs designed its income assistance to Indians on reserves to match the going provincial rates, to avoid incenting Indians to move in or out of reserves and create a more or less seamless system of protection (Moscovitch and Webster, 1995: section 3.4; Shewell, 2004: 314-20). Administrative arrangements changed over time, very often to involve Aboriginal governments in the management of transfers and services, but, from then on, there was denying that provincial governments had a decisive role to play, since they determined welfare incomes, even for Indians on reserve (Shewell, 2004: 318-20).

By 1990, 28.6% of Aboriginal identity persons over 15 years old received social assistance. For Indians on reserve, the rate was even higher, at 41.5% (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996: volume 2, chapter 5, section 1.2). Social assistance, noted with regret the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples "has become the staple of many Aboriginal communities" and "contributed to the persistence of individual and community economic dependency" (1996: volume 2, chapter 5, section 2.9).

Recent data for Aboriginal identity persons do not exist because provincial governments do not differentiate social assistance recipients on the basis of identity. The most recent statistics for on-reserve Indians, however, suggest the pattern has hardly been reversed. In 2003, 34.8% of Indians on reserve received social assistance, compared to 5.5% for the country's general population (excluding Indians on reserve). In Manitoba, this rate for on-reserve Indians was 43.9% (National Council of Welfare, 2007: 27).

Over time, a number of benefits and services were added, to cover, in particular, labor market and economic development programs, child welfare, education, health and housing. It is not possible, here, to present a full picture of these programs, but the resulting arrangement can be characterized as a somewhat modified version of the Canadian welfare state. Labor market and economic development programs are provided by the federal government to all Aboriginal peoples, as they are for all Canadians, since they are within the bounds of federal jurisdiction. Child welfare, education, health and housing programs, on the other hand, follow the bifurcated social assistance pattern, because they constitute primarily provincial jurisdiction. On these matters, Ottawa more or less takes on the role of the provinces for Indians on reserve, and the provinces respond to the needs of other Aboriginal peoples. There are, however, numerous and important exceptions.

In remote and especially northern communities where provincial programs proved unavailable, the Department of Indian Affairs continued to finance off-reserve services and, on the contrary, when the provincial programs were more present, some on-reserve services were contracted out to the provincial government. "All this," wrote Moscovitch and Webster, "made for numerous administrative anomalies" and for a division of roles that proved "complex and at times ridiculously so." In Western Canada, in particular, the demarcation between Indians on and off reserves became extremely vague (1995: section 3.5). As is often the case in the Canadian federation, the federal government also introduced programs that went beyond its jurisdiction, in this case to provide direct support to off-reserve Aboriginal peoples, in post-secondary education for instance

(Frideres and Gadazc, 2008: 368). Hence, as Frances Abele prudently concluded, "few generalizations about eligibility stand" (2004: 13).

Consider, for instance, child welfare. Until 1996, when the last residential school closed in Saskatchewan, the main "child welfare" services offered by the federal government were the residential schools where children forcefully taken from their home were ill treated and abused. Already in the 1950s, however, Ottawa had more or less abandoned the field to the provinces, which had jurisdiction and expertise. Provinces did not do much better. Convinced native children were at risk, social workers withdrew large numbers of them from their families and communities, reproducing in a different way the logic of residential schools, in what became known as the "1960s scoop" (Blackstock and Trocmé, 2005: 15-16). Gradually, Aboriginal child and family agencies developed and started to provide more sensitive services, on and off reserves, and they achieved recognition through various agreements with Ottawa and the provinces. Much remains to be done because aboriginal children continue to be disproportionately represented among children in care (National Council of Welfare, 2007: 86), and because aboriginal agencies remain underfunded and bound by rules that are not always adapted to their cultural and socio-economic context (Blackstock and Trocmé, 2005: 28-29; Hudson and McKenzie, 2003: 49-50). Still, tripartite forms of governance are emerging, that are reshaping the child welfare services available to Aboriginal communities.

Similar dynamics are at play with respect to education, health care and, to a lesser extent, housing. Most Aboriginal children outside the northern territories attend provincial schools and are thus offered regular services by the provincial government, but Indian and Northern Affairs Canada also funds schools on reserves, and these are increasingly managed by the bands more or less in conformity with the provincial curricula, to make it possible for students to transfer to other schools (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996: volume 3, chapter 5, section 1.4). In practice, the result is rather messy, because, as the Auditor General has often remarked, there is no framework to clarify the respective responsibilities of the federal government, of the

provinces and of band councils (Mendelson, 2006b: 4). Non-completion rates, both on and off reserve are also dramatically higher than those of the majority (Mendelson, 2006b: 1; National Council of Welfare, 2007: 48). The federal government also provides support for post-secondary education.

In health care, a similar bifurcated pattern holds, with the federal government mostly financing services on reserves, and provincial governments providing services for the off reserve Aboriginal persons. For a long period, both orders of government seemed primarily "focused on divesting" themselves for their responsibility, but since the 1980s, they have accepted more readily the need to improve preoccupying health outcomes, and have sought to develop new collaborative agreements to better involve Aboriginal communities in the management of health care (MacKinnon, 2005). As for housing, the federal government has played the leading role, both in financing homes on reserve and, often on a cost-shared basis with provincial government, affordable housing in cities (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, volume 3, chapter 4, section 4). Here as well, the results have been less than impressive (National Council of Welfare, 2007: 73-82).

In the end, Aboriginal peoples may remain, in the words of Alan Cairns, "uncertain citizens," with little trust in governmental institutions and a weak sense of belonging, and their status may not be exactly that of non-Aboriginal Canadians, but, for better or for worst, they have been reached by the welfare state (Cairns, 2005: 27). As this happened, and especially in the 1980s and 1990s when notions of partnerships and joint governance spread rapidly, social protection for Aboriginal peoples undoubtedly became "a multilevel reality" (Papillon, 2008: 126). Consequently, there can be no coherent response to Aboriginal poverty without the involvement of many actors, including provincial governments.

Provincial Governments and Aboriginal Poverty

Despite the powerful influence of provincial decisions on the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples, few scholars have attempted to characterize provincial approaches systematically. Some case studies and a few comparisons exist that identify peculiarities and differences, but there is simply no comprehensive framework encompassing all ten provinces. One interesting exception is Jennifer Dalton's comparative work, which shows that Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and, to some extent, British Columbia are better equipped and have more success in settling land claims negotiations than Ontario and Québec, where the process is less institutionalized and than the Atlantic provinces, where there are hardly any claims settlement policies (2009: 41-45). These capacities, however, which more or less mirror the "real politics" of Aboriginal population distribution, may not extend to social policies. Indeed, Jonathan Malloy found that, in 2000, provincial aboriginal units, which encompassed both negotiations with Aboriginal communities and the coordination of provincial policies toward Aboriginal peoples, tended to be more associated to intergovernmental and northern affairs in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and New Brunswick, whereas they formed independent ministries or secretariats in British Columbia, Ontario, Québec, and Nova Scotia (Prince Edward Island having only marginal capacity; Malloy, 2001: 134-36). Less successful in land claims negotiations, the latter provinces could have stronger policy capacities or commitments in other areas.

A clear picture, however, is difficult to draw, because commitments, needs, demands and resources vary enormously from one province to the next. Alberta, for instance, has historically been very reluctant to recognize any form of self-government but it has proven willing, on a pragmatic basis, to finance services for Aboriginal peoples, including the Métis, often the last ones to be recognized (Abele and Graham, 1989: 149-53). Long hostile to Aboriginal demands, British Columbia has also come around in recent years, to refashion its policies in the spirit of the Kelowna consensus (Tennant, 1990: 228). And there is, necessarily, a chasm between a province like

Prince Edward Island, where there were 1730 Aboriginal persons in 2005, and one like Saskatchewan, which according to some demographic projections could become an Aboriginal province by the middle of the century (Abele and Prince, 2006: 575).

One way to assess differences among provinces is to look at recent policy proposals regarding Aboriginal poverty, which have the advantage of being explicit, relatively comprehensive, and indicative of a government's orientation on both the standard of living gap and the possibilities of self-government. Developed incrementally and on a case-by-case basis, social policies designed for Aboriginal peoples were never conceived with the explicit objective of fighting poverty, and they ended up forming a complex "patchwork quilt" (Hanrahan, 2003: 239). Yet, at the turn of the century, poverty rose on the political agenda — in Canada and elsewhere in the world (Noël, 2006b and 2008) — and it helped focused public debates and the policy process about Aboriginal quality of life. The Kelowna agreement, summed up the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine, "was designed to eradicate poverty in First Nations communities and make Canada a better place" (CBC News Online, 2006).

All provinces that have produced a poverty reduction action plan or strategy — chronologically Québec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba; New Brunswick is in the consultation phase — have acknowledged the importance of attacking Aboriginal poverty. Behind this consensus, however, there are significant differences in the manner in which the issue is recognized and approached.

In the action plans and strategies of Newfoundland and Labrador and of Nova Scotia Aboriginal peoples are identified as a vulnerable group among others (Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006: 5-6, 17, 20; Nova Scotia, 2009: 14, 22), and the federal government appears as a necessary partner, upon which the province should rely.

The examples of actions presented in the Newfoundland and Labrador poverty action plan are telling in this respect. Apart from the settlement and implementation of

land claims and self-government agreements, the provincial government wishes to "continue to work with the federal government to ensure the Aboriginal peoples of this province receive maximum benefit from the initiatives arising from the meeting among First Ministers and National Aboriginal leaders in Kelowna in November 2005" and to "assist people of Aboriginal descent to gain full access to federal programs and services" (Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006: 17). There are simply no specific commitments that would bring the provincial government to act on Aboriginal matters, except possibly for the development of indicators, and this again would be done in collaboration with the federal government (Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006: 7). This narrow perspective on Aboriginal poverty seems consistent with a treaty negotiation process — which was successful for the Inuit in 2005 but not for the Innus so far — where provincial officials insisted much more on the possibilities of economic development than on social or recognition matters, and with a social policy consultation process that remained, at best, irregular and limited (Alcantara, 2007: 187-88; Hatherly, 2006: 11-12).

In Nova Scotia's poverty reduction strategy, provincial actions regarding Aboriginal peoples appear more forthcoming and cover employment, health and housing, but they are all presented as measures to be implemented in partnership with the federal government, and as much as possible with Aboriginal communities (Nova Scotia, 2009: 21-22, 25, 27, 34). The strategy document refers, in particular, to the Mi'kmaq-Nova Scotia-Canada Tripartite Forum created in 1997, which facilitates collaboration on social development for the province's Mi'kmaq (34; Saulnier, 2009: 8). To stay in Atlantic Canada, we can note that, still in its consultation phase, New Brunswick's forthcoming poverty reduction plan does not seem, so far, to include an Aboriginal dimension (see: www.gnb.ca/0017/promos/0001/index-e.asp). As for Prince Edward Island, both questions seem marginal. Usually, in the Maritimes, Aboriginal politics tends to be low profile, local and conciliatory, at a good distance from the symbolic clashes that often characterize negotiations elsewhere in the country (Coates, 2000: 164).

In Québec's action plan, Aboriginal peoples are also presented as a vulnerable group,

but the policy approach is clearly different. Here, the federal government is almost totally absent. There is only one mention, near the end of the document, to state that Ottawa is expected to make its normal financial contribution to the programs relevant to the fight against poverty, within the bounds of the constitutional division of powers (Québec, 2004: 77). The privileged approach builds on bilateral, nation-to-nation dialogues, involving notably the Grand Council of the Crees and the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrabor. On a local level, the Québec government also plans "to provide to band councils the resources necessary to implement local strategies to fight poverty and exclusion" (Québec, 2004: 78; our translation), and specifies in the 2006 annual report on the action plan that it wishes to "develop and implement policies against poverty in collaboration with Aboriginal communities, in a manner respectful of their culture" (2006: 10).

This document announced, as well, the October 2006 Mashteuiatsh First Nations socioeconomic forum, which was initiated by the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador and brought together 250 Aboriginal representatives, the provincial and federal governments, and political and civil society leaders. This forum produced its own action plan, with measures concerning economic development, employment and income security, education and culture, health, social services and childhood, infrastructures, housing, sustainable community development, and youth (Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador, 2006). Debates continued in the spring of 2009 about the effective implementation of this action plan (Commission permanente des institutions, 2009). Clearly, however, Québec was on a distinct path with respect to Aboriginal poverty, a path that corresponded perfectly to an approach developed gradually since the 1960s, which sought to promote bilateral, nation-to-nation relationships with Aboriginal peoples (Papillon, 2008: 130-46; Martin, 2008: 32-37). At the end of the Mashteuiatsh Forum in 2006, Ghislain Picard, the Chief of the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador, captured this difference when he explained that he was "delighted with the new dialogue that has emerged between the government of Québec and the First Nations" and that he knew "a great deal of work" would be necessary "to persuade the federal government to recognize" the importance of this

dialogue. Following him, Québec Prime Minister Jean Charest stated that he "would be very happy if one day in [his] life […] the members of the First Nations felt as though they were full fledged members of Quebec society and contribute to its development so that they could say, 'I am also a Québécois'." (Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador, 2006: 135-36 and 140).

Ontario's poverty reduction strategy stands somewhere between that of the Atlantic provinces and that of Québec and also defines Aboriginal peoples as a vulnerable group. Like the Atlantic provinces, the Ontario government emphasizes the need for federal political and financial engagement, but in its own way, more or less like Québec, it also values bilateral dialogues with Aboriginal communities, and the development of specific provincial programs. Many Aboriginal specific policies, already in place or planned, are outlined in the poverty reduction strategy (Ontario, 2008a: 6, 15, 27, 40). Bilateral dialogues, however, tend to stand apart from the poverty reduction strategy, because they derive largely from the McGuinty government's 2005 "New Approach to Aboriginal Affairs," which emphasizes collaboration and partnership, on social policies as well as on claims negotiations (Ontario, 2005; Dalton, 2009: 26). In 2008 and 2009, the Ontario government signed bilateral agreements with the Métis Nation of Ontario and with Treaty 3 First Nations, which committed both parties, respectively, to "work together to improve the well-being of Métis children, families, and communities" and "the quality of life for First Nations communities in Grand Council Treaty 3 territory" (Ontario, 2008b and 2009).

For all their differences, Québec and Ontario fit the pattern of provinces "with a relatively small Indigenous [population], more economic means, and an interest in distinguishing itself from Ottawa in political matters" (Martin, 2008: 35). For Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the situation is radically different. As Martin observes, "in relatively poor provinces, and where the Indigenous population is present in significant numbers, the government has a diminished interest in championing the cause of Aboriginal people, lest this position result in substantial cost to the public purse" (35).

In Manitoba, the NDP government of Gary Doer was reluctant from the first place to respond positively to strong social calls for a poverty reduction strategy (Carter and Polevychok, 2009: 25). When it finally announced one, in May 2009, it released a rather short, cursory document, produced with little or no prior consultation (MacKinnon, 2009). This document, entitled "All Aboard" mentioned Aboriginal peoples as a vulnerable group, but presented as its main, comprehensive action to improve the well-being of Aboriginal peoples its *Closing the Gap* commitment, an approach that may have echoed a plan signed in October 2006, without the provincial government, by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the First Nations of Manitoba, but was probably more of a slogan used by Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs to lend some coherence to its different programs (Manitoba, 2009a: 3-4, 6; Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, 2006; Manitoba, 2009b: 1). The 2007 budget, for instance, refered to this commitment to list a series of measures ranging from a training program developed by Manitoba Hydro to education support and health initiatives, in a manner that seemed more additive than innovative (Manitoba, 2007: E6-E7). Given the Aboriginal population of the province and its socioeconomic situation, acknowledging so little undermined the credibility of a rather meager poverty reduction strategy, and indicated a weak commitment to build new partnerships to reduce Aboriginal poverty.

Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia do not have poverty reduction plans or strategies, and except for British Columbia, have not sought to address Aboriginal poverty in a comprehensive, collaborative fashion (Holden, Chapin, Dyck and Frasier, 2009; Faid, 2009; Graham, Atkey, Reeves and Goldberg, 2009). Saskatchewan has a *Framework for Cooperation* to govern its social and economic policies regarding off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples, but this is a rather succinct document, hardly indicative of a genuine bilateral engagement (Saskatchewan, 2001). Likewise, Alberta offers programs on a pragmatic basis to the First Nations and Métis communities on its territory, but it basically avoids any approach that would bring up more ambitious discussions about governance.

British Columbia long followed a similar path, but the same day the Kelowna consensus was reached, in the province, the provincial government announced that a *Transformative Change Accord* had been signed with the federal government and the First Nations of the province, with the objective of closing "the social and economic gap between First Nations and other British Columbians over the next 10 years" (British Columbia, 2005). A similar objective was part of the agreement signed in May 2006 with the Métis of the province (British Columbia, 2006).

Obviously, there is a distance between these different frameworks and agreements and actual policies. There was, for instance, much disappointment in the years following Québec's Mashteuiatsh Forum and, as Frances Abele and Katherine Graham demonstrated, in the 1980s Alberta's programs were not as restrictive as the province's uncompromising stance would have suggested (Abele and Graham, 1989). In provinces where Aboriginal peoples are numerous, in particular, both needs and political reality compel governments to act and implement various measures and programs (Mendelson, 2006: 2; Carter and Polevychok, 2009: 12-13). Still, political discourse and frameworks matter, because they announce and institutionalize orientations and commitments. As such, poverty reduction plans and strategies are instructive. Figure 1 below summarizes the evidence and helps us locate the different approaches of provincial governments.

Figure 1: Provincial Approaches to Aboriginal Poverty

	Poverty Reduction	Poverty Management
Recognition	Québec Ontario Nova Scotia	British Columbia
Delegation	Newfoundland and Labrador Manitoba New Brunswick	Federal government Saskatchewan Alberta Prince Edward Island

On the left of Figure 1 are provinces that have adopted or are in the process of adopting poverty reduction plan or strategies, and on the right are governments that have not, and simply manage poverty, to alleviate as much as possible its consequences. Vertically, these governments are differentiated by the importance they give to recognition and partnership processes involving Aboriginal peoples, as opposed to more conventional practices of delegation toward bands or communities. This is obviously a rough representation, which masks important differences, with respect to both poverty reduction and Aboriginal policies. The figure nevertheless points to interesting similarities and differences, notably between provincial governments that have made commitments to reduce poverty and renew relationships with Aboriginal peoples, and governments that have not. The two dimensions are distinct and evolve relatively independently, as can be seen with the cases of Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Manitoba and British Columbia, although the nature of Manitoba's poverty reduction strategy could have also justified placing the province in the lower-right quadrant.

The cases of the three Prairie provinces are particularly striking because they are at the epicenter of the Aboriginal poverty problem and seem extremely reluctant to move forward on the issue. This may be explained by the very difficulty of the question in these three provinces. But it could have to do, as well, with the broader politics of social policy and Aboriginal affairs. This, however, is a topic for another paper.

Conclusion

Scholarship on Aboriginal politics has largely focused on the high politics of land claims and self-government negotiations, at the expense of the politics of living standards and social policy (Abele and Graham, 1989; Cairns, 2005: 1-2). Behind conflicts about difference and recognition, however, were also daily state practices that profoundly shaped the lives of peoples and communities. In Canada, Aboriginal peoples have been particularly affected by these practices because they were largely excluded from the labor market, from home ownership and from mainstream social relations. Historically, they were "wards" of the federal government, which dictated many aspects of their life, down to family relations. With the advent of the welfare state, they were gradually incorporated into mainstream social programs, and these often involved provincial governments, but they did not necessarily have the same options or opportunities as other citizens.

In this paper, we sought to clarify the role played by provincial governments, through an assessment of their poverty reduction plans or strategies and of their policy frameworks regarding Aboriginal quality of life. In doing so, we tackled a huge and complex question, and could only begin to identify trends and differences. We have not, for instance, looked systematically at programs, expenditures and outcomes, nor have we attempted to account for the political determinants of provincial approaches. Still, revealing differences emerged, between provincial governments that were committed or not to reduce poverty, and willing or not to recognize Aboriginal peoples as partners in the governance of social policy. Overall, a pattern appears that distinguishes a politics

of neglect and of reliance on Ottawa in the Atlantic provinces, a politics of engagement and innovation in Québec, Ontario and, to some extent, British Columbia, and what seems to be a deliberate political of avoidance in the Prairie provinces and in Ottawa, where the Prime Minister seems to have brought with him the Albertan vision. Sadly, it is in the provinces where the problem of Aboriginal poverty is the most acute that provincial governments appear the least receptive and engaged.

To some readers more familiar with Aboriginal politics and with issues of recognition, these conclusions about poverty politics may appear unusual or even odd. In our opinion, they cast a revealing light on the politics of Aboriginal quality of life in Canada. More importantly, they remind us, as did Miriam Smith in her presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association, that the politics of difference never plays out simply "on the abstract ground of recognition or in a stand-alone arena of culture or even political culture, but rather on and through the concrete materiality of public policies — both action and inaction — which, in turn, are subjected to debate, conflict, contestation and political mobilization" (2009: 2). Hence, for Aboriginal peoples in Canada, recognition necessarily works itself out also through provincial welfare states. Conversely, for persons in situation of poverty, of whatever origin, the politics of poverty is always also a politics of recognition.

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