

Can Indians survive as 'cultural nations'?

Yes, says one expert, under certain conditions; by no means, rejoins another

SURVIVING AS INDIANS: The Challenge of Self-Government
By Menno Boldt
University of Toronto Press
384 pages; cloth \$55, paperback \$19.95

Menno Boldt is a sociology professor at the University of Lethbridge and one of Canada's foremost academic students of natives. This book is his *magnum opus*, a comprehensive, systematic statement of his views. At half the length, it might have exerted a noticeable impact on public opinion as a trade paperback; as it is, it will probably become just one more academic book about Indians. And that is a pity, because, despite its long-winded and opinionated style, this is the most intellectually stimulating book about Indians that I have read in many years.

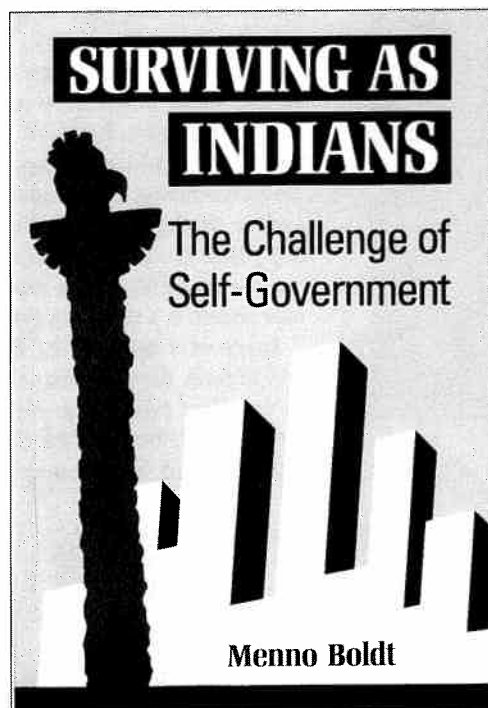
According to Professor Boldt, the only goal that would make Indian self-government worth while is to "survive as Indians," that is, as cultural nations conserving their traditional "principles and philosophies." There is no value in self-government if it simply means that the Indian "elite class" (the leading families on reserves) assumes administration from the Department of Indian Affairs for their own benefit. In that scenario, Indians might survive as a legal category but would no longer be distinct "cultural nations" because their traditional values of consensus and communalism would be lost.

Like most contemporary academics, he is severely critical of the entire British-Canadian tradition of dealing with native peoples. He characterizes the Royal Proclamation of 1763, once regarded as the foundation of Indian rights, as "villainous" because it was a unilateral assertion of British sovereignty over Indians. Almost everything done subsequently he interprets as an attempt to marginalize or assimilate Indians so that European settlers could freely reshape the continent to their own desires—a massive injustice from start to finish.

More surprisingly, Prof. Boldt is equally critical of current trends in Indian politics. He trenchantly analyzes the quest for aboriginal rights, self-government, sovereignty, and constitutional entrenchment, showing that none of these, alone or together, will enable Indians to "survive as Indians." He provides a convincing demonstration that

the fashionable "tripod" theory of Indian economic development—revival of hunting and fishing, job creation on reserves, and enhanced government grants—simply will not work, except perhaps for a few reserves possessing valuable resources or located near metropolitan areas.

On the contrary, Prof. Boldt argues strongly that Indians must join the general Canadian economy and work like everyone else. Continued existence on welfare payments



will only demoralize them further and make impossible their "survival as Indians."

To encourage labour market entry, he would end the current tax immunity enjoyed on reserves and subject Indians everywhere to the same taxes as the general population. Revenues thereby garnered would be returned to Indian governments headquartered on the reserves, however, thus helping make them dependent for revenue upon their own people, rather than upon Ottawa—in itself an important reform. It would also diminish the perverse disincentives of the present system, which encourage Indians to remain on reserves isolated from the larger economy. Finally, he argues, it would undercut the self-destructive illusion held by many Indians that they should not pay any taxes at all.

Although I agree with Boldt's critique of contemporary Indian politics, I have to conclude that his vision of "surviving as Indians" is a fantasy. As he himself points out, their traditional cultures lie in ruins. Their languages, with few exceptions, are extinct or virtually so. Their traditional hunting and gathering economy is marginal in the modern world. And their tribal political systems have been largely supplanted by bureaucratic structures. Drumming, pow-wows and sweat lodges have been revived for ceremonial purposes, but this hardly counters the pervasive influence of North American popular culture.

Sadly, but probably irreversibly, traditional Indian cultures of self-sufficiency have been replaced by the "culture of dependency." Based on Prof. Boldt's own evidence, the chances for "cultural revitalization" seem minuscule. Cultures cannot be revived and maintained under conditions radically different from those for which they evolved and were suited. Society is not a museum.

Prof. Boldt uses the Jews as an example of what Indians might become: people who adapt to their surroundings, integrate into the prevailing economy, and yet retain their culture without wielding political sovereignty. The comparison is intriguing but ultimately unpersuasive. The Jews were a single people controlling a well-defined territory. When military defeats sent them into the Diaspora, they carried with them a cohesive culture based on a great literary tradition. They had the same technologies as the other peoples of

the ancient world and thus could support themselves as farmers, craftsmen, traders and merchants wherever they went.

None of these conditions applies to Indians. They are not one people, but many, and their traditional cultures, which were not codified in literary traditions, were adapted to stone-age levels of technology. Under these conditions, their survival as cultural nations is more likely to resemble the Gypsies rather than the Jews—a sad existence on society's margin, trapped in a morass of social pathologies.

Prof. Boldt's heroic defence of culture survival notwithstanding, I am more than ever convinced that assimilation is the only realistic option for Canadian Indians.

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