

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1

New reservations: Canadians must challenge the `aboriginal orthodoxy': [Final Edition]

Flanagan, Tom. **The Ottawa Citizen** [Ottawa, Ont] 10 May 2001: A19.

Find a copy



http://sfxhosted.exlibrisgroup.com/calgary?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&genre=unknown&sid=ProQ:ProQ%3Acanadiannews&atitle=New+reservations%3A+Canadians+must+challenge+the+%60aboriginal+orthodoxy%27%3A+%5BFinal+Edition%5D&title=The+Ottawa+Citizen&issn=08393222&date=2001-05-10&volume=&issue=&page=A.19&au=Flanagan%2C+Tom&isbn=&jtitle=The+Ottawa+Citizen&bttitle=&rft_id=info:eric/

Abstract (summary)

What I call the aboriginal orthodoxy is an emergent consensus on fundamental issues. It is widely shared among aboriginal leaders, government officials and academic experts. It weaves together threads from historical revisionism, critical legal studies and the aboriginal political activism of the last 30 years. Although its ideas are expressed in many books, it has no Marx and Engels, that is, no canonical writers to authoritatively define the ideology.

Even though only a few RCAP proposals have been implemented, the report stands as a monument to the new orthodoxy, and the people who share those beliefs are actively pushing the federal government to move in that direction. Unless there is serious public debate, sooner or later we are likely to end up where the RCAP wanted us to go. Canada will be redefined as a multinational state embracing an archipelago of aboriginal nations that own a third of Canada's land mass, are immune from federal and provincial taxation, are supported by transfer payments from citizens who do pay taxes, are able to opt out of federal and provincial legislation, and engage in "nation to nation" diplomacy with whatever is left of Canada. ... I doubt it's what most Canadians want for themselves and their children. But it's what we may get if we don't open the debate on the aboriginal orthodoxy.

Perhaps the damage to Canada would be tolerable if it meant that aboriginal peoples would escape from the social pathologies in which they are mired to become prosperous, self-supporting citizens. But I believe the actual outcome of implementing the aboriginal orthodoxy would be quite different. Although aboriginal leaders might achieve rewarding political careers, most aboriginal people would remain poor and dependent, marginalized on reserves and other territorial enclaves. This would be a lose-lose situation in which Canada and aboriginal peoples would both become worse off than they should be.

Full Text

Excerpted from *First Nations? Second Thoughts*, by Tom Flanagan, published by McGill-Queen's University Press. This week, the book won the \$40,000 Donner Prize for books on public policy in Canada. Mr. Flanagan

is a political science professor at the University of Calgary.

What I call the aboriginal orthodoxy is an emergent consensus on fundamental issues. It is widely shared among aboriginal leaders, government officials and academic experts. It weaves together threads from historical revisionism, critical legal studies and the aboriginal political activism of the last 30 years. Although its ideas are expressed in many books, it has no Marx and Engels, that is, no canonical writers to authoritatively define the ideology.

I do not claim to say the last word on these difficult issues, only to offer some viewpoints that are seldom heard today.

- - -

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommendations were too sweeping and too expensive for the cautious, economy-minded government of Jean Chretien. In early 1998, the Liberal government announced an Aboriginal Action Plan that cost far less than the RCAP proposals and avoided formalizing aboriginal government as a "third order of government" in the federal system. The centerpiece of the new plan was an apology from the government for Indian residential schools. A "healing fund" was established, costing \$350 million. There was also supposed to be an increase of about \$250 million in the next year's budget for measures in support of self-government and economic development. Skeptics may be forgiven for suspecting that some or all of the alleged new money would have been spent anyway because of aboriginal population growth and existing programs.

Even though only a few RCAP proposals have been implemented, the report stands as a monument to the new orthodoxy, and the people who share those beliefs are actively pushing the federal government to move in that direction. Unless there is serious public debate, sooner or later we are likely to end up where the RCAP wanted us to go. Canada will be redefined as a multinational state embracing an archipelago of aboriginal nations that own a third of Canada's land mass, are immune from federal and provincial taxation, are supported by transfer payments from citizens who do pay taxes, are able to opt out of federal and provincial legislation, and engage in "nation to nation" diplomacy with whatever is left of Canada. ... I doubt it's what most Canadians want for themselves and their children. But it's what we may get if we don't open the debate on the aboriginal orthodoxy.

Perhaps the damage to Canada would be tolerable if it meant that aboriginal peoples would escape from the social pathologies in which they are mired to become prosperous, self-supporting citizens. But I believe the actual outcome of implementing the aboriginal orthodoxy would be quite different. Although aboriginal leaders might achieve rewarding political careers, most aboriginal people would remain poor and dependent, marginalized on reserves and other territorial enclaves. This would be a lose-lose situation in which Canada and aboriginal peoples would both become worse off than they should be.

Eight of the propositions in the aboriginal orthodoxy are particularly dubious. They are stated below in italics, followed by my own contrarian positions:

Aboriginals differ from other Canadians because they were here first. As "First Nations," they have unique rights, including the inherent right of self-government.

Aboriginal peoples were in almost constant motion as they contested each other for control of land. In much of Canada, their present place of habitation postdates the arrival of European settlers. Europeans are, in effect, a new immigrant wave, taking control of land just as earlier aboriginal settlers did. To differentiate the rights of earlier and later immigrants is a form of racism.

Aboriginal cultures were on the same level as those of the European colonists. The distinction between

civilized and uncivilized is a racist instrument of oppression.

European civilization was several thousand years more advanced than the aboriginal cultures of North America, both in technology and in social organization. Owing to this tremendous gap in civilization, the European colonization of North America was inevitable and, if we accept the philosophical analysis of John Locke and Emer de Vattel, justifiable.

Aboriginal peoples possessed sovereignty. They still do, even if they choose to call it the "inherent right of self-government."

Sovereignty is an attribute of statehood, and aboriginal peoples in Canada had not arrived at the state level of political organization prior to contact with Europeans. The "inherent right of self-government" would be acceptable in contemporary Canada if it had the same meaning as the American formula of "domestic dependent nations" possessing "tribal sovereignty"; but in fact it means much more.

Aboriginal peoples were and are nations in both the cultural and political senses of this term. Their nationhood is concomitant with their sovereignty.

The European concept of nation does not properly describe aboriginal tribal communities. Unless we want to turn Canada into a modern version of the Ottoman Empire, there can be only one political community at the highest level -- one nation -- in Canada. Subordinate communities, such as provinces, cities and ethnic or religious groups, cannot be nations.

Aboriginal peoples can successfully exercise their inherent right of self-government on Indian reserves.

Aboriginal government is fraught with difficulties stemming from small size, an overly ambitious agenda, and dependence on transfer payments. In practice, aboriginal government produces wasteful, destructive, familistic factionalism.

Aboriginal property rights should be recognized as full ownership rights in Canadian law and entrenched, not extinguished, through land-claims agreements.

Contemporary judicial attempts to redefine aboriginal rights are producing little but uncertainty. Supreme Court decisions define aboriginal title in a way that will make its use impossible in a modern economy.

Land-surrender treaties in Ontario and prairie provinces mean something other than their words indicate. Their wording needs to be modernized -- reinterpreted or renegotiated -- to recognize an ongoing relationship between nations.

The treaties mean what they say. Their reinterpretation, while it might not be as far-reaching as the redefinition of aboriginal title in British Columbia and Atlantic Canada, has the potential to be both expensive and mischievous for the economies of all provinces in which treaties have been signed.

Aboriginal people, living and working on their own land base, will become prosperous and self-sufficient by combining transfer payments, resource revenues, and local employment.

Prosperity and self-sufficiency in the modern economy require a willingness to integrate into the economy, which means, among other things, a willingness to move to where jobs and investment opportunities exist. Heavy subsidies for reserve economies are producing two extremes in the reserve population -- a well-to-do entrepreneurial and professional elite and increasing numbers of welfare-dependent Indians.

Although I think the proponents of the new aboriginal orthodoxy are mistaken, I admire their energy and

moral conviction. I pay them the highest compliment of taking their ideas seriously. I invite them to reply in kind.

Illustration

Black & White Photo: Julie Oliver, Ottawa Citizen / All Canadians must soon hold a serious public debate on aboriginal issues. ;

Copyright Southam Publications Inc. May 10, 2001

Indexing (details)

Title	New reservations: Canadians must challenge the `aboriginal orthodoxy': [Final Edition]
Author	Flanagan, Tom
Publication title	The Ottawa Citizen
Pages	A19
Number of pages	0
Publication year	2001
Publication date	May 10, 2001
Year	2001
Section	News
Publisher	Infomart, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.
Place of publication	Ottawa, Ont.
Country of publication	Canada
Publication subject	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
ISSN	08393222
Source type	Newspapers
Language of publication	English
Document type	Business; Excerpt; Opinion
ProQuest document ID	240459124
Document URL	http://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/240459124?accountid=9838
Copyright	Copyright Southam Publications Inc. May 10, 2001
Last updated	2010-06-11
Database	Canadian Newsstand Complete

Copyright © 2013 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. Terms and Conditions