

by Joseph Quesnel

## Aboriginal housing needs change, not dollars



The recent federal budget threw \$400 million tax dollars at Aboriginal housing, but it will do little good. Although this money will certainly result in numerous homes being built, this is nothing but a short-term fix that fails to address the systemic issues involved. Even if the government committed billions to on-reserve housing, it would inevitably deteriorate to its current deplorable state after a few years. Then the cries for more funding would start again in this never-ending cycle.

The budget represents the same failed approach taken by the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. In 2007, the committee authored a report on Aboriginal economic development called *Sharing Canada's Prosperity- A Handup, not a Handout*. The report was a major let down and did not embody the tough-sounding self-reliance suggested by the title.

Marching to the same drum as those before them, the committee gave a resounding "no" to privatization simply because of

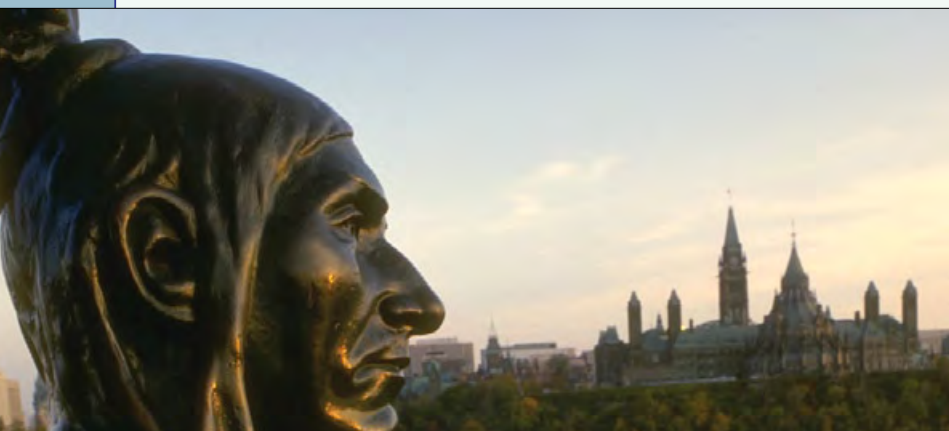
the negative consequences of the *Dawes Act* in the United States. In this initiative, Congress attempted to grant individual property rights to American Indians. As a result, many Indians lost their lands. Unfortunately, the committee failed to take into consideration the government did not provide these Indians with the tools to make this transition. This example of "privatization" does not have to be the model we follow.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that economic development is predicated on private ownership, the report devoted just one page to the issue. Then, the authors took care to write, "This Committee believes that there are better solutions than those offered by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation."

In the end, the committee members must have breathed a collective sigh of relief as they retreated to the familiar territory of old solutions and half-measures. The status quo ensures that indigenous people will never fully enter into the economic mainstream.

This is hard for some to see, even if they care. Years ago, I talked with a government official who worked in Aboriginal housing. We were both attendees at a Winnipeg conference dedicated to this topic. My acquaintance and I agreed

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that First Nations housing is deplorable and sometimes resembles Third World conditions. But, when it came to the root of the problem, we were worlds apart.

This official, like many bureaucrats within the "Indian industry," blamed the government and its lack of funding. On the other hand, my visits to reserves and conversations with indigenous people led me to a different conclusion: that the real problem was the lack of private property rights on reserves. The bureaucrat seemed genuinely mystified at the obvious.

First Nations housing is not individually owned by band members, but is given out by band councils. Even paying rent on many reserves is a farce. Band councils rarely evict members who fall behind on their payments. Free of such consequences, residents stop caring about the condition of "their" homes which are not actually theirs. Repairs never get done, mould grows, and the place falls into shambles.

This has been noted before. Don Sandberg, Aboriginal policy fellow with the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, observed reserves in Manitoba where band members would break their doors and simply wait for someone within administration to fix them.

Calvin Helin, an Aboriginal author from B.C., called this phenomenon "learned helplessness." Here, people are so used to having everything provided for them, they are inevitably sapped of initiative, creativity, and even their inhibitions. The result is dysfunction.

This problem has nothing to do with race or culture. It is the inevitable consequence whenever any group is paid to do nothing or



is chronically treated like children. It occurred in places behind the Iron Curtain where risk and creativity were discouraged. At times, it continues among tenants of all races in public housing.

That's why governments of all political stripes dance around the real problem of Aboriginal housing. They have provided mortgage assistance to Indian families and entered into partnerships with private real estate associations to provide housing. But they have not had the courage to change the *Indian Act*, and grant property rights to band members instead of their chief and council. This, and only this, will secure lasting, secure, and quality home ownership for First Nations.

While Native leaders breathe easier and politicians return to their own private homes, First Nations people sleep in houses not really their own on lands held in trust by the federal government. Until we have leaders who speak the truth, this will never change. ■

A Metis, Joseph Quesnel is former editor of the Winnipeg-based Aboriginal newspaper *First Perspective* ([www.firstperspective.ca](http://www.firstperspective.ca)) and a regular contributor to the *Winnipeg Sun*. Presently, he works as policy analyst with the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Lethbridge, Alberta and is heading up an Aboriginal Governance Index in that province. Joseph is a long-time advocate for limited government.