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Listen to Tanis Fiss

Earlier this week, Paul Martin and most of his Cabinet met with 70 aboriginal leaders at an Ottawa summit that he suggested would mark a "brighter, healthier and more prosperous future" for natives. But anyone looking for serious solutions to the disastrous conditions that plague Indian reserves would have had to look far from the nation's capital — all the way to Calgary, home of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation's Centre for Aboriginal Policy Change. This past weekend, the centre released a report by Tanis Fiss titled *Apartheid: Canada's Ugly Secret*. As its name suggests, the report is suitably blunt about the "Third World" conditions common on reserves. And it does not shy away from bold solutions. Rather than simply tinkering with the present model, she proposes doing away with reserves altogether.

The "Indian industry," as Ms. Fiss has termed it, will no doubt claim she is trying to rob natives of their land. But it's the present system of land ownership — in which on-reserve aboriginals are effectively denied the property rights white people take for granted — that holds natives back. Reserve lands are held communally, which means they cannot be mortgaged to provide start-up capital for new businesses. The fact that most aboriginals have no financial stake in reserve land, and therefore no incentive to undertake renovations or basic maintenance on their homes, also explains why this nation's aboriginal housing stock is so dilapidated.

The CTF's proposal to give deeded ownership to individual aboriginals thus makes good sense. So too, does the abolition of the tax exemption for natives who live and work on reserves, which Ms. Fiss has rightly identified as a "perverse incentive" to stay in communities that are not economically sustainable.

Andy Mitchell, the Indian Affairs Minister, has already dismissed the CTF's proposal on the basis that it overlooks the "basic tenet of aboriginal life" that property is held by a community rather than by individuals. But this is an unpersuasive response. Under the Soviet system, remember, communal ownership was very much a "basic element of Russian life." But it was abolished because it was a system of ownership that people realized had led them to abject poverty. Yes, it is true that pre-contact Indian tribes did not recognize private

property rights in the same way as the Western societies that conquered them. But does that mean we must doom them forever, freezing their economic system to conform to an anthropological stereotype?

It is hard to be optimistic that any significant reform will come out of Mr. Martin's native confab. Recall that Mr. Mitchell's predecessor, Robert Nault, proposed some sensible measures that would have modernized native governance — including improved accountability measures for band councils, greater disclosure of annual budgets and salaries, written electoral codes and new mechanisms that would allow rank-and-file natives to launch complaints against band leaders. But even these relatively mild reforms met with objections from aboriginal leaders, prompting Mr. Martin to scrap Mr. Nault's legislation entirely.

On Monday, Mr. Martin finally unveiled his alternative plan. He promises native leaders increased "consulta-

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tions," a restructuring of the Indian Affairs department, the creation of a new secretariat to address Inuit issues, and an opportunity for native leaders to rank the government's performance through an "Aboriginal Report Card." These measures no doubt reflect a well-intentioned effort on Mr. Martin's part to give aboriginals more say over how Ottawa makes policy and directs funding. But they will do little to address the basic problem Ms. Fiss has identified: the communal structure of the reserve system.

If Mr. Martin is to make good on his promise to break the "cycle of poverty, indignity and injustice" that afflicts aboriginal communities, Mr. Martin must press forward with real reforms — even if this means offending the "Indian industry." In this regard, the bold ideas advanced by Ms. Fiss are an excellent place to start.