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Enduring neoliberalism in Alberta's oil sands: the troubling effects of private–public partnerships for First Nation and Métis communities

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Abstract

Changes in federal government relations with First Nations and Métis in Canada have been described as shifting over time, from fur trade colonialism, to welfare colonialism, to neoliberal partnerships. Acknowledging changes and continuities in Aboriginal peoples–state relations over time, this article examines the effects of recent policies that emphasize private–public partnerships for economic development on Indigenous communities in northern Alberta. We argue that while the term 'partnership' connotes equality, cooperation, and consensus, the actual workings of partnerships are anything

but equal, and the effects include fragmentation, competition, and lack of overall accountability. These outcomes work against the needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities.

Keywords:

Indigenous, neoliberal, employment, education, state

Notes

1. Aboriginal rights, as referred to under Section 35, are based on the idea that the Aboriginal peoples of Canada have the right to govern themselves in relation to matters that are internal to their communities, integral to their unique cultures, identities, traditions, languages, and institutions, and with respect to their special relationship to their lands and resources.

2. The act including commentary was accessed online at: http://www2.parl.gc.ca/Sites/LOP/LegislativeSummaries/Bills_ls.asp?lang = E&ls = C7&source = library_prb&Parl = 37&Ses = 2 [January 2010].

3. INAC is the successor to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

4. However, in a 10-year anniversary assessment of the government's fulfillment of the plan set out in the RCAP report, the Assembly of First Nations (2006) argued that many promises were unfulfilled.

5. The analysis of the First Nations Governance Act by Stephen Cornell of the University of Arizona is available at: http://www.fngovernance.org/pdf/StephenCornellexecsumm.pdf.

6. As of 1 April 2010, ASETS replaces the former Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy (AHRDS) discussed later in this article.

7. This information about ASETS was accessed online at: http://www.turtleisland.org/discussion/viewtopic.php?f = 18&t = 6237 [January 2010].

8. Information about the First Nation response to the development of ASETS was accessed online at: http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id = 107 [January 2010].

9. For example, Franklin et al. argue that a discourse of partnership was associated with the Third Way policies enacted under Prime Minister Tony Blair, in this case, used to navigate between social democratic statism and neoliberal free markets by weakening ‘once important distinctions between public and private, left and rights, government and industry, state and market’ (2004, p. 3).

10. Bradford (2003) draws on the ideas of Hall and Soskice about LMEs and CMEs in his discussion of policies introduced by New Democrat and Conservative governments in Ontario. He argues that neoliberal partnerships are more often associated with LMEs because of their historical absence of institutionalized networks and structures to support partnership. An institutional focus, in his view, helps to explain implementation challenges to social democratic partnership innovations that he observed in Ontario.

11. Max Weber suggested that for certain jobs to confer high income and special advantages, it is important for their incumbents to have various means of excluding others from access to them, a process described as ‘social closure’ or ‘opportunity hoarding’ (Wright 2009, p. 104). Educational credentials are a common way of restricting access to jobs.

12. The five First Nations that compose the ATC are the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McMurray 468 First Nation, and the Mikisew Cree. There are significant numbers of Métis living in Fort McMurray, Fort McKay, Fort Chipewyan, Chard (Janvier), Willow Lake (Anzac), and Conklin. The number of individuals considered non-status is unclear. There are very few Inuit in the municipality, and therefore, we refer specifically to First Nations and Métis in the report.

13. TLE claims are a type of specific claim; these arise in cases where a First Nation asserts that the Government of Canada did not provide the reserve land promised under treaty.

14. Treaty 8 was signed in 1899, embracing an area of 840,000 square kilometres in northwestern Canada.

15. The 1986 TLE awarded the MCFN 12,280 acres of land (none of which is in the oil sands) and $26.6 million. Since signing the TLE, the MCFN has been expanding the

scope of its governance; although still considered a band within the Indian Act, not a formal self-governing First Nation, the MCFN signed a five-year renewable Canada/First Nations funding agreement in the late 1990s that allows the group to manage its budget with greater authority over program delivery and funding allocation (Slowey 2008). The MCFN has also become a player in local industrial activity with its group of companies; MCFN-operated businesses employ close to 200 local people, translating into an annual impact on the community of roughly $5 million (Slowey 2008).

16. The majority of interviews (41) were audio-taped and transcribed and notes were taken for all others.

17. This information was presented by Dr. Ali Abdelrahman at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called ‘Strength in Numbers’ in March 2008.

18. Information about this program was available on the following website: http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/employment/aboriginal_training/about_asep/fact_sheet.shtml [Accessed 19 October 2008].

19. Conflict between Métis and First Nations groups is not surprising given the differential treatment of groups by government. As Abele et al. note, ‘First Nations are often uneasy when federal attention turns to Métis and Non-Status Indians, fearing that an already inadequate financial pie will be sliced into every smaller pieces, and … that the importance of treaties will be eroded’ (2005, p. 107). On the other side, Métis groups seek greater recognition of their rights by government.

20. Both of these programs were established in 2003. Information about these programs was available on the following website: http://www.employment.alberta.ca/hre/ets/reg/Display.asp?EntityCode = HLEVEL_2&EntityKey = 10436 [Accessed 24 November 2008].

21. The Water Keepers III conference brought 300 guests from all over North America to Fort Chipewyan, including representatives from environmental and social organizations, politicians, and journalists. A few years ago, a doctor in the community spoke out about the unusually high cancer rates, which were attributed to oil sands activity.

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