



news release

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For immediate release

Landmark Report

Aboriginal Rights: Must the UN force Canada to act?

“We’re sitting on a powderkeg of unresolved rights and deformed relationships,” says Ann Pohl. “Doing nothing to resolve Aboriginal rights issues is a recipe for more conflict.”

Courts across Canada seem unable to change the political and economic structures with respect to the granting of land, self-government and other rights to First Nations. We see continued inaction and even a backlash against Aboriginal peoples in response to conflicts such as Ipperwash and Gustafsen Lake, and despite appalling rates of poverty and suicide among Aboriginal people. These are symptoms of a deeper problem: lack of recognition of Aboriginal treaty and land rights, which are human rights.

How can we break this logjam on Aboriginal rights? In her timely new report *Building International Awareness on Aboriginal Issues*, Ann Pohl signals a possible breakthrough: appealing to United Nations human rights mechanisms. If followed through, Pohl contends, this could lead to a radical reorganization of Canada’s governmental structure, as was suggested by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Pohl wrote the report on behalf of Citizens for Public Justice, a national public advocacy organization.

Canada likes to think of itself as a world leader on human rights. “Canadians and our government think that human rights abuses only happen in other parts of the world,” says Pohl. “Do we realize that Canada is losing respect due to our treatment of Aboriginal people?” The UN Human Rights Committee noted in April 1999 that “the situation of Aboriginal peoples was the most pressing human rights issue facing Canadians.”

“We’re only dealing with the most obvious symptoms of this critical issue,” notes Harry Kits, executive director of Citizens for Public Justice. “We need to explore new strategies to

deal with the root causes of Aboriginal poverty and marginalization. This report deepens the discussion and hopefully will lead to action.”

Walking alongside Aboriginal people in their efforts to improve their lives has been a key focus of Citizens for Public Justice during the past 25 years. “The Gospel call to put our faith into action and to set free the oppressed inspires CPJ’s work in support of Aboriginal people,” says Kits. “All people have the right to live according to their convictions and values. For Aboriginal people, that means their treaty and self-government rights must be respected and reflected in our political and economic frameworks. Yet because those rights have still not been respected, we see the poverty and sense of powerlessness which blight the lives of so many Aboriginal people and their communities.

“As Christians we need to respond to this brokenness in our midst. We can make a critical difference by speaking out for the political and economic changes needed to affirm Aboriginal rights and thus turn this tragic situation around.”

Copies of *Building International Awareness on Aboriginal Issues* have been sent to every Aboriginal community in Canada, sparking a lively debate. Discussion on the report is taking place through the Aboriginal Rights Coalition’s website, www.home.istar.ca/~arc/. UN Human Rights Committee member Martin Scheinin spoke at the Toronto launch of the report, a sign that it is being taken very seriously at the international level.

In addition to its daring policy implications, the 32-page report is highly readable and acts as an up-to-date primer on Aboriginal issues in Canada.

Ann Pohl is a social policy researcher and consultant, and a key organizer for the Coalition For A Public Inquiry Into Ipperwash. Her report was funded by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

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