

## REVIEW ESSAY

*Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* by Alan C. Cairns. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000. 280 pps. ISBN 0-7748-0767-9, Cloth CDN\$39.95, ISBN 0-7748-0768-7, Paper CDN\$24.95.

In a brief intellectual autobiography in the introduction to *Citizen Plus*, Alan C. Cairns lets his readers know that early in his career he worked as a senior staff in the team that crafted the *Hawthorn Report*, which is credited with giving impetus to the idea that Aboriginal peoples should be considered "citizens plus" in the Canadian polity. For the next thirty years his research focused on "federalism, the Constitution, constitutional reform, and the role of the courts in constitutional change" (12). He has now returned full circle, deploying his depth of knowledge as a senior scholar in politics in an attempt to revive the abandoned concept, to respond seriously to the recent Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) report, and in effect to bring a voice from the discipline of political studies into the debates around self-government. This is an ambitious undertaking, and one fraught with dangers. Revival of older concepts poses the danger of being charged with 'a failure of imagination' and 'the last gasp of an imperial mentality.' To his credit Cairns acknowledges these possibilities.

That, indeed, is one of the strengths of this book. There is an honesty in this engagement, a tone of soul searching, that breathes life into what might otherwise be another Canadian dull constitutional analysis. Another strength that a scholar of Cairns' experience brings to the table is a breadth of knowledge: a range of references that spans from studies of Old Order Amish in the United States, theoretical material around cultural hybridity, and demographic studies of ethnic minority marriage patterns, and a depth of knowledge, particularly around the whole panoply of legal, political and philosophical studies of Aboriginal rights and citizenship. These lend considerable gravity to his judgments and without fail provide his reader with valuable resources for pursuit of the issues

in question.

The seriously of purpose, the genuine care and concern that Cairns devotes to these matters, deserve an engagement at the same level. What follows is a serious attempt to come to grips with my own considerable distance from many of Cairns' positions: to take up the glove he has thrown down for a reasoned debate. If, then, I do not pull many punches, I do so out of respect for an enterprise of thought which I presume would want to be read with a rigour and determination equal to that which informed the manner in which it was written. Let me state my differences with Cairns through five propositions which counter some of the more deep rooted positions he stakes.

*First Proposition: at this historical juncture, the ground of relations between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers must philosophically be an acknowledgment of alterity.* The most basic premise of Cairns' approach is that "one of our essential tasks is to foster a sense of common belonging to a single political community, as well as the recognition of difference. If we achieve only the latter, our triumph will be pyrrhic" (80). A good deal of the book is devoted to a critique of Aboriginal separatism in the sphere of self-government discourse, but Cairns is not by any means of assimilationist. Rather, he wants the 'plus' of citizens plus to take cognizance of the 'citizens', he wants to promote the development an Aboriginality that is firmly within the rhetoric of Canadian commonality. He advocates what he calls a 'modernizing Aboriginality' in which "individuals and communities remake themselves by choosing from the options at hand" (105). This implies that those trajectories of policy which aim to promote autonomous self-governing Aboriginal political entities are misguided, for Cairns, because they rest on a notion of Aboriginality "defined in terms of an authenticity with roots in the distant past" (105).

The position is not without considerable philosophical power. Dominick LaCapra once argued that the critical problem in inquiry was "negotiating proximity and distance with the other that is at one and the same time a part of the self", which could well encapsulate a moment of agreement between Cairns and my own position. However, given the history of colonial power relations that have created the current inequities, and given the continues extraordinary degree to which the culture of newcomers to Canada has simply not understood or respected Aboriginal cultural difference, it is disingenuous to the point of naivete to suggest that commonality rather than difference should be the ultimate objective of policy.

I share with Cairns a Western legacy: a respect for the tradition of civic humanism that shifts like an ineffable current through the last two millennia of thought and practice. But the cultural and historical per-

spective of Aboriginal peoples gives lie to the principles that the Canadian State enunciates as its own ground for being and pretends to inherit. For Aboriginal peoples, the State has not been a benign liberal-democratic arena where the nature of their insertion into the body politic as a whole may be freely debated. The State has been a totalizing agent, a structure of power relentlessly imposing its forms and logics on Aboriginal communities, bodies, lands. Cairns appropriates two Aboriginal analyses, that of John Borrows and of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, to suggest that (in this instance referring to a position paper by the latter) "only by becoming fully involved in the Saskatchewan community will Aboriginal peoples become part of the province wide 'we' community and thus have the moral levers to engage the majority as fellow citizens in tackling poverty and social malaise" (208). But their position as I read it is more that the dominant society must begin to learn from Aboriginal peoples and cultures for the betterment of both: this can only happen if Aboriginal cultures are not taken for granted, if there is an acknowledgment that there is much about those cultures not yet understood. That is, we must begin from a premise of alterity, the otherness of the other, if there is to be any hope of a meaningful accommodation.

*Second Proposition: the trend toward urbanization of Aboriginal peoples must not become a 'fact' which is deployed to diminish the particular claims of those in rural communities.* Cairns argues that the tendency of RCAP to focus on land based models of self-government ignores "the choice of half the Aboriginal population" to live in cities, which may put it "on the wrong side of history" (185). The numbers argument is frequently deployed these days, by Cairns and others, to suggest that Aboriginal leaders who do not represent the views of urban Aboriginal peoples are out of touch with a growing reality. Here is another fact: in the twentieth century numbers have rarely served a small group of people living for the most part in isolated parts of the country. The claim of Aboriginal peoples for justice was never based on their proportion in the population, but rather on qualitative claims of cultural difference and historical claims for legally enshrined rights. There are as many people now living in northern Aboriginal communities – more actually – than there were at the turn of the century. They were always in a minority. Now they may be, or soon become, a minority within that group of people who are descendants of the original occupants of this land. Their call, their claim for justice, remains as strong as it always was. The many and compelling issues surrounding urbanization of Aboriginal peoples do demand a response, perhaps even a response along the lines delineated by Cairns, but that response must not be applied to

those for whom the statement "ours is an urban civilization" (185) continues to have no relevance.

*Third Proposition: the notion of cultural hybridity is a dead letter that cannot provide a basis for any form of critical cultural politics.* The time was sure to come when a liberal line of discourse would find the value in that stream of post-colonial thought, *pace* Homi Bhabha, that valorizes hybridity, the mixing of cultures. Hence, it comes as no surprise to see Edward Said's statement – "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (qtd 103) – in Cairns. The point that hybridity theorists have been trying to make is that when in power a cultural purist discourse can have reprehensible results, when deployed toward minority cultures a cultural purist discourse can have reprehensible results, when deployed towards minority cultures a cultural purist discourse can become a cage. The threoretical point that all cultures are, and have always been, marked by interaction with other cultures has a place. However, when raised to an uncritical celebration of the hybrid the discourse implodes: fascism was a hybrid form, even in the manner it deployed a discourse of its own purity, as any postmodern cultural transgression. Hybridity on its own merits does not tell us anything about whether a particular cultural form is worth attention, respect, or admiration. Only the substantive way a particular people have responded to their particular problems and the problems that appear to face most of us in our existential being, can give us a basis for engaging in cultural politics. For Cairns, the fact of cultural hybridity underwrites the modernizing Aboriginality he sees as an alternative vision: "now, with the new story line, going for a Big Mac, or becoming a lawyer, are simply contemporary ways of being Aboriginal" (104).

In the end, surprisingly, this view coupled with the notion of urbanization, actually makes Aboriginality a matter of so-called 'blood' rather than cultural choice. An Indian working for a multinational corporation is as much as Indian as the Cree trapper he is dispossessing. There is a truth to this statement, of course, a truth for which Duncan Campbell Scott would cheer. Cairns wants to develop a politics for Aboriginal peoples that does not exclude the urban, hybrid individuals emerging. He ends with a politics solely for their benefit. And once again, the isolated and marginalized, too culturally pure to be in fashion, since, after all, many of them speak their own language, are comfortably silenced.

*Fourth Proposition: Aboriginal nationalism and political agency, in its many diverse forms, is not imported.* This is a point about history, and here we find Cairns repeating a discursive trope that seems particularly endemic to discussions of recent Aboriginal history. In his discus-

sion of 'how did we get to where we are?' Cairns offers two explanatory points. The first he treats briefly: the notion that Aboriginal people were a vanishing race has "lost credibility." The second is that "domestic developments could not have brought us to where we now are without the support offered by the international environment" (40-1). He then reviews in a page or so the global history of decolonization as a context for Canadian decolonization. There can be no doubt that there is some truth to this. But how we got to where we are becomes a more compelling story if two other truths are foregrounded: material conditions of life, including poverty, and the emblems of oppression have always been the basis of social movements; and secondly, Indigenous leaders, local women and men, are the primary makers of local history. They did not need someone from elsewhere—one thinks of Reagan's mythic Cuban infiltrators in El Salvador—to tell them they are oppressed. This notion pervades Cairns' historical account. Although for example he shows an awareness of the importance of the Dene Declaration in giving impetus to the language of nationhood that became common in Aboriginal politics (166), he still states that the "1976 Parti Quebecois victory gave Aboriginal peoples the opportunity and incentive to couch their demands in constitutional terms" and "reinforced a nation-to-nation definition of the situation" (171). Aboriginal peoples did not need incentive from Quebec, and one should not uncritically presume that Quebec nationalist separatism and Aboriginal nationalist separatism are the same. And the nation-to-nation definition of the situation owes at least something, never mentioned by Cairns, to the fact that for centuries European powers in the Americas treated the Aboriginal peoples they encountered as nations.

*Fifth Proposition: ecological and environmental grounds of Aboriginal self-government must inform the political dialogue.* One thing absent, entirely absent, from Cairns' account is a sense of the ecological field within which humans operate. This is convenient, since it allows him to ignore the 'fact' that the small proportion of Aboriginal people who live in rural Canada are the effective occupants of a majority of Canada's land mass. And what is the best way for them to live? Might it not be too presumptive to suggest that some use of local ecological resources may have the best chance of providing a sustainable economy in those place? Might not one of the issues that Aboriginal self government is really about be the question of how that land is to be used: as a giant storehouse for the urban civilization that Cairns treasures, or as a homeland for distinct cultures, to frame the question in a manner that approximates Thomas Berger's model. Perhaps the issue is not so much that RCAP and others put too much weight on land-based models of

self-government, but rather that the question of land base is one of the most fundamental questions that the discourse of self-government is about.

*Sixth Proposition: Aboriginal peoples are peoples.* A small point of linguistic moment. The term 'Aboriginals' has steadily come creeping into everyday language. Cairns uses it interchangeably with 'Aboriginal peoples.' I wish he wouldn't. 'Aboriginal' is an adjective. It qualifies another word. That word is people. With 'Aboriginals' we are a bare step to a word that became offensive in the Australian context and could become equally offensive here.

I have a variety of other concerns around Cairns' book: why does he not challenge the work of Menno Boldt and Gerald Alfred, political scientists like himself who might have a stronger argument about the relevance of a 'nationalist' discourse in Aboriginal matters? Why is he so unconcerned with Nunavut, as a public government that in many respects might be said to meet his own standards of citizenship-inclusion, treating it rather as another exercise in separatist self-government? Why are some authors, Emma LaRocque and John Borrows, with whom Cairns agrees, identified as Aboriginal scholars, while others, those he disagrees with, James (Sakej) Henderson and Mary Ellen Turpel, never given the same acknowledgment? But these are of smaller moment.

In the midst of such radical disagreement, let me add some additional words that point to the considerable strengths of *Citizen Plus*. For newcomers to the field, the book does provide for the most part a sound overview of the issues, histories, and positions that have emerged in the debate surrounding Aboriginal self-government. The chapter on RCAP, in particular, conveys the main impulses of the voluminous report and is one of the better summaries and engagements with that work. I would echo Cairns' view that "the federal government's response to the Erasmus-Dussault commission is an embarrassment" (122). Cairns is very strong on the legal advocacy literature that surrounds Aboriginal rights and the reader comes away from his text better informed on the many positions that come from that arena.

What Cairns offers is a particular liberal perspective on a debate that passed him by. His view is that the notion of 'citizen plus' was lost in the 1969 controversy over the white paper, and was replaced in the next decade by Aboriginal nationalism and by the notion of Aboriginal rights, which focused exclusively on the 'plus' part of the equation. He does not seem to notice that by the 1970s Aboriginal peoples were not interested in their Canadian citizenship for good reason: the State had spent a century trying to enforce citizenship on them at the expense of their rights. By winning the battle over the white paper, they blew the lid

off a whole range of discursive logics that confined their political aspirations and so a whole new terrain emerged. Finally, they were allowed to talk substantively about what Aboriginal rights meant. The notion that a reinvigorated concept of 'citizens plus' offers a new or better path out of the current conflict is not compelling and raises more questions that it resolves: what is there in this polity that is supposed to attract the attention and loyalty of those whose values and ideals as embodied in culture it ruthlessly attacks?

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