



United Nations Association in Canada
Association canadienne pour les Nations Unies

National Conference Executive Summary

February 29 – March 2, 2008





Introduction

This is an executive summary of the findings and experiences expressed by *A Sense of Belonging's* (SB) regional coordinators during the three day national conference held in Ottawa, Ontario from February 29 to March 2, 2008. The coordinators of the project's nine regions found themselves meeting at the end of the project's second year of operation and thus much of the discussion revolved around the successes, lessons learned and concerns for the future to be passed on to the next incarnation of the project. The areas of greatest interest have been identified below as **Media, Employment, Education Aboriginal and Ethnocultural Realities**, and various **Regional issues**.

The National Conference

The SB National conference took place from February 29 to March 2, 2008. On February 29th, the UNA-Canada and the *A Sense of Belonging* held a roundtable on Parliament Hill with a wide range of parties including Senator Vivienne Poy, representatives from a variety of governmental and non-governmental agencies, concerned citizens from the broader public, and the project's regional coordinators. Beginning with an introduction by Executive Director Kate White and a catered lunch, the roundtable featured a performance from members of the *Capitol Poetry Collective* and was an opportunity to display photo prize winners from the project's *About Face* photo contest. The roundtable allowed for a constructive dialogue based on many of the



themes that the project has dealt with over the past two years. Guest speaker's Dr. Randall Hansen and Dr. Howard Duncan were able to bring their own thoughts on the subject of, to use the words of Dr. Duncan, "the offer of Canadian identity". Given that immigration and the changing demographics of Canadian society, as Dr. Hansen explained, is possibly one of the most central issues of our time, it the roundtable was significant in that it showed the public the range of the project and also offered participants a forum to discuss Canadian identity openly.

On March 1, 2008, as part of the National Conference, a cultural night was held. Entitled *i.d.*, the event was held at the *Mercury Lounge* and featured cultural performers from the Haitian, Indian, Inuit, and Ukrainian communities, amongst others. The event was extremely well-received, and was attended by more than 100 members of the community. Like the roundtable, the event was an opportunity to showcase the SB project to the larger community.

Throughout the three days, the SB project team consulted with regional coordinators from the communities on issues relating to the project's impact in their communities, best practices for future projects, and general evaluation. The following are a list of some themes that were brought out throughout the discussions with regional coordinators and at the roundtables.

Themes

Media



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A consensus among *A Sense of Belonging's* regional coordinators was that the negative stereotyping of minority groups continues to be a plague festering within the various media sources of their respective communities. Yellowknife reported that they felt there was a “built in racism [in the media] in our community, especially toward Aboriginals.” Further, representatives from Kamloops, British Columbia felt the media’s attitude toward groups such as Aboriginals was not a question of placing emphasis on positive or negative coverage but rather that “Our papers are business run...Aboriginals do not exist. There is a media blackout.” Saskatoon expressed that in addition to the bias of race being mentioned in virtually all negative news stories and not in positive ones that upon contacting reporters to cover a positive story involving minority groups that they were “certainly not easy to get to come out.”

Despite the unfortunate state of media coverage that virtually all of *A Sense of Belonging's* staff began their work in, they each sought out their own measures to bring about positive change in their regional media. This change was sought by many different approaches. In Yellowknife, one coordinator created a newsletter on diversity issues, screened films of various cultures and held a photo exhibit all within her high school. Her regional counterpart, in an effort to combat the lack of representation of the Yellowknife Muslim community, conducted tours of local mosques. The tours brought about both an “enhancement in community dialogue” as well as “a lot of media attention” including “a feature in a major newspaper in Calgary on Muslim worship in the North.” In Montreal, the coordinators there participated in a roundtable discussion on immigration held by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, while in Calgary a participant enlisted the help of the CBC to begin her very own panel on diversity issues in the city. The panel consisted



of representatives from various “minority groups, Aboriginal groups, women’s shelters, etc. [Who] would talk [once a month] about what was going on around the city and the communities in and around it.” She felt that the panel served not only as an excellent source for feedback from these groups but as a means to “[get] to know their perspectives.” She also noted the important experience of having “establish[ed] a trusting relationship” with the panel. Thanks to her initiative, the CBC “came across a lot of big stories...that exposed [subjects such as] the inherent racism in the immigration system.”

Winnipeg and Kingston focused their efforts on the medium of photojournalism. Winnipeg made it a priority to teach youth of the impact that photography can have by holding a diversity themed amateur photography contest. Our Kingston participant, meanwhile, worked directly with the *Snap* publication, which she felt served as her most successful connection [to the community].”

Though the project’s participants held an overall view that the media tends to project a negative stereotype on minority groups in their regions, undeterred, they showed how the media is a subjective outlet and initiated positive changes to help provide a voice to those previously shut out. There was found, however, to exist a certain modesty common among those who do charitable work, as a participant from Yellowknife pointed out, that “people who do a lot of work in our community...do not want to go to the media nor feel welcomed by it.” *A Sense of Belonging* has recognized that such timidity potentially impedes community awareness of diversity issues. As a result, the project has implemented media training as a means to encourage participants to become a media presence in their areas. Remarkd one veteran coordinator from Kamloops, “The media



training has really affected people. It was a great thing for Kamloops and now that people [involved] are paying attention to the importance of media that has been good.”

Employment

Obtaining meaningful employment and equal access to the job market was identified by *A Sense of Belonging's* regional coordinators as some of the most prevalent struggles facing newcomers and minority groups. Saskatoon's participant felt employment to be the biggest barrier immigrants faced. She also found that in terms of quality of life that most immigrants in the city were “not necessarily on welfare but close to it.”

Overall, such inequities were agreed to have been at least partially due to the lack of recognition of foreign credentials (such as university degrees) in Canada. Calgary's representative noted that she felt the help of settlement agencies didn't go as far as needed. “They help immigrants with language skills and resume building but there is a lot missing. Access to the job market must be more transparent.” Many of the coordinators agreed that difficulty finding meaningful employment for immigrants and minority groups was a source of “tension in the community” and in turn many coordinators made improving these conditions a top priority. Working to resolve this inequity was a passion for many of *A Sense of Belonging's* participants as they are themselves first generation immigrants and know the hardships newcomers can endure all too well. Said one such participant “I have studied this issue [regarding foreign credentials] and I ask why do certain countries progress more than others? It's usually when countries allow for all qualified people to compete [for jobs] and if you're the best [candidate], you're the best



and that's it.”

Though recognition of foreign credentials was seen as an overarching problem, it was found that other employment issues were particular to respective communities. The exploding economy and expansion of the city of Calgary, for example, had its own set of concerns which include an “acute labor shortage” according to SB’s Calgary RC.

Yellowknife and Calgary both reported the same problems of employment deficits and lack of housing for workers. This was illustrated by their discovery of people that were “living in homeless shelters but getting up in the morning to go to work.” Calgary quite rightly asserted this disparity between employment and housing as a severe “quality of life issue”. Saint John’s, a city with that receives relatively fewer newcomers than most other major Canadian cities, stressed that as “[Newfoundland’s] population is decreasing we need refugee and immigrant populations [to come in and fill in employment gaps].”

Despite some very big challenges in this area many of our participants reported many promising findings. Winnipeg noted that “the Aboriginal community is taking power. They are beginning to own businesses and are taking part in more civic engagement.” Yellowknife also expressed “huge successes” with Aboriginal employment, for example, that “those who used to be hunters and trappers are now working as fly-in, fly-out workers for diamond companies. We’ve all adapted to change and new processes, new things.”

Much work is still underway for many regions. Kamloops has been pushing to get the issue of Aboriginal employment more attention and as a result have been meeting with the city council and chamber of commerce there. One of Winnipeg’s participants is currently in the process of drafting “a proposal for a community resource fair to get



groups to talk with agencies and get people together and make connections in the city.”

Our Kingston representative perhaps best encapsulated *A Sense of Belonging's* work in this field when she said, “People have the right to doubt the quality of immigrants [or other minority groups] but I think it’s my job to prove that they have value.”

Education

Education was perhaps the arena where *A Sense of Belonging* made some of its greatest strides and initiated its widest breadth of activities. Many of our participants encountered some initial difficulties, such as school board bureaucracies preventing them from gaining easy access to classrooms. The Participants’ perseverance and dedication to engaging youth in diversity issues eventually won them many successes.

A key factor that many participants found essential to gaining them access to the students was linking the project’s initiatives to the school’s curriculum. Kamloops commented that by using this approach, teachers were “surprised at how much could be found applicable to the curriculum.” A Yellowknife participant approached the administration of her high school and they were enthusiastic to help with several events such as a cultural kitchen and a school-wide diversity photo exhibit. School administrators were not the only staff eager to assist with getting *A Sense of Belonging* into classrooms. Our participants also established strong partnerships with many teachers as well. Saint John’s reported a scope of as many as 300 teachers available to help with the project. That said, the quantity of teachers helping out was of course not the goal of the project’s connection to the classroom. A project coordinator from Yellowknife, praising the commitment and talents of the dynamic teachers they worked with, marveled



at how they found that “teachers actually have a vast breadth that they can teach about. All you have to do is get them into something constructive.”

Many of our participants focused on Aboriginal and immigrant issues for their diversity exercises. Winnipeg’s representatives spoke of some excellent events that they organized for classes. One such event combined awareness of the Aboriginal community and the dangers of stereotyping. “We had an individual from a local reserve talk to people from the city about her struggle trying to find a sense of belonging and how she found it. People shared their individual stories of feeling stereotyped. It was very powerful. It showed how we are all real people with real stories. A lot teachers were involved.”

Another of Winnipeg’s events called *Challenges and Choices* dealt with first and second generation immigrants. “We had immigrants come in and they spoke of their experiences to the classes. . .By getting them to speak it put faces to the stories and encouraged engagement in dialogue...It was incredible how the kids had no idea how difficult it was for immigrants and refugees. It was important to talk about this with kids at such a young age.” Winnipeg also worked directly with the Aboriginal community on issues of race at a Cree Nation school. Saskatoon took a similar approach to expose where “immigrants and aboriginals come from. We’ve worked hard to get groups together to break down stereotypes.” Our Kamloops coordinators focused on issues of sexual diversity and worked with children at the critical sixth and seventh grade levels. They were shocked at how they are now being requested to speak to classes in the fourth and fifth grade. It demonstrates a movement by educators to engage students in issues of tolerance earlier than ever.

Not all of our participants found the classroom to be the only venue to exhibit A



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Sense of Belonging's education initiatives. Community workshops were also found to be an effective means to engage the public. In Montreal, our participants partnered up with the government and held a workshop on tolerance with a local non-profit *Baobab Familial* that boasted the involvement of “students of over 183 different nationalities.” In Calgary, our participants initiated a conference with the Calgary Multicultural Centre “on the importance of the education of the mother tongue language.” So well received was the conference in the city that it was reported “the mayor of Calgary named a day ‘Language Day’ as a result”. In Saskatoon, our correspondent discovered that outside of the classroom, Student Recreational Committees were “constantly looking for projects with meaning behind them” and served as an excellent bridge toward school boards at large.

Education continues to serve as an area where *A Sense of Belonging's* dedicated workers can invariably establish meaningful connections to the communities that they belong to and also have an impact on enhancing the perspectives of the scores of people who take part in our activities. As one Winnipeg coordinator reflected on her experience working with schools, “a lot of the time it just takes getting the youth to talk about issues and I think we provided an environment for that...people said their perspectives on immigration and aboriginals were changed”.

Aboriginal and Ethnocultural Realities

Early on in the project our members identified a concern that there existed a divide between Aboriginal communities and immigrant populations. This “divide” became convoluted when it was revealed in some of our communities with particularly



prominent populations of Aboriginal peoples addressed concerns that they felt “lumped in” with other disparate groups. During *A Sense of Belonging’s* roundtable discussions it was ascertained that an exclusivity between these groups could serve as an hindrance to seeking to solve some of their problems. It was found that a lot of the struggles facing many of the groups that the project worked with were not necessarily exclusive to a particular category. It is felt by *A Sense of Belonging’s* participants that discrimination, marginalization and racism are common struggles for many groups in our country and that a fractured state of relations only serves as a barrier to progress.

Kamloops stressed that they encountered a “great challenge [in] the fractured state of communication between ethnic groups, Aboriginals, and NGOs”. Many other regions concurred that they too had experienced this frustration. One of our Yellowknife participants, however, reported on making progress on widening the scope of communication between groups in their region. “Most [outreach] groups in Yellowknife are various homelessness groups, shelter groups and protection groups. When we put them into a room with groups like disabilities groups, they often discover their commonalities. There is a preconceived notion that there is a focus on an area other than the one they are trying to serve. By getting together they can discover their commonalities, struggles and how to work together”.

A Sense of Belonging seeks to bridge more communities together such as these and many others. It is recognized by our panel that the condition of Aboriginal and ethnocultural communities is dynamic and is in a constantly evolving state. With that as our collective mindset, it has become one of our core focuses to help ensure that these communities are consistently headed toward positive and progressive territory.



Regional Issues

It is, of course, taken into consideration that many regions have their own distinct situations. In Yellowknife, it was identified that the scars of the residential schools assimilation project are still deeply felt. Montreal expressed concerns over religious accommodation. As a course of action, the Montreal participants engaged in the writing of a “declaration of human rights with the Muslim community to give [the government of Quebec] our opinion in on discrimination in our province.”

Issues regarding the expression of sexual orientation, for example were particularly prevalent in the Kamloops region and the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community. Kamloops reported conditions in the GLBT community as an oft neglected but very dire safety concern. As one RC put it “a huge problem for the people in this community is that they are unsafe simply existing as they are openly”. Our Winnipeg branch noted a similar lack of GLBT presence in their community. One coordinator remarked, “I realize the visibility is not there. We just had a meeting at the GLBT resource centre and I couldn’t even find the door.” On a positive note, Kamloops also stated that through their work with the project there have been modest advances in gaining exposure for the GLBT community. “A dialogue has opened. There hasn’t been a huge change yet per se but in regard to sexual diversity it has expanded. At school and community events it is an issue that is at least on the table.” Kamloops also hopes to expand the scope of those they are trying to increase safety and representation for. “Now we’ve been invited to the [municipal council] to address issues involving sex workers because we’re now seen as the representatives for sexual diversity.” Sexually diverse groups are not the sole focus of the Kamloops members, “it is our priority that we always



bring Aboriginal groups to the table they are routinely shut out.” Our Yellowknife participant also reported some advancements, “It’s been a great experience to see the civic participation that’s taken place namely the Centre for Northern Families.”

Though Saint John’s maintains that its greatest fight has been to progress from its current place as the country’s least multicultural city, they reported some development for the newcomer community. “The first immigrant directory was established and more money is being put into this venture. There has been, as a result, development in the acceptability of immigrants.”

Conclusion

The National Conference represented an ideal of the SB project, that dialogue is part of the foundation for a community and a nation that is not just diverse, but willing to discuss these issues in a frank and open way. Themes such as media, employment, education, the gap (real or perceived) between Aboriginal and ethnocultural realities, and various regional issues were only some of the topics that came up for discussion. That the project could have had its roundtable on Parliament Hill is in itself a success, in that it represented the ideal that *A Sense of Belonging* has for the country, one where the multiplicity and complexity of the nation’s identity can be on display in its most conspicuous symbol of Canadian democracy.



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