**People to People, Nation to Nation: Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)**

**Thesis:**

For a fundamental break from the colonial and assimilationist past, the Canadian government and Canadians must understand that Aboriginal peoples constitute nations, and that Aboriginal people's sense of confidence and well-being as individuals is tied to recognition of their nations. This should be the major organizing principle of a restructured relationship between Aboriginals and the Canadian state.

**Main Arguments:**

Because of original occupancy of the land, treaties that recognized Aboriginal rights, the constitution that affirms those rights, and continued cohesion as peoples, Aboriginals constitute nations within Canada.

Four principles are proposed as the basis of a renewed relationship: Recognition (of Aboriginals as original inhabitants of the land, and as nations), Respect (for the unique rights and status of First Nations), Sharing (of wealth, resources and benefits), and Responsibility (meaning being accountable for promises). Treaties are to be “the mechanism for turning principles into practice”, in keeping with historical conventions.

Aboriginal nations possess an inherent right to self-government that should be institutionalized, and Aboriginal governments should constitute one of three orders of constitutionally-entrenched government in Canada. Self-government can take the form of national governments (potentially of multiple reserves bounded by nationality), public governments, or “community of interest governments” in urban centres, etc.

The Commission proposes a 7-step process for restructuring the relationship. 1) The federal government should issue a new royal proclamation stating a commitment to recognition, respect, sharing and responsibility. 2) The federal government should enact legislation to guarantee implementation of treaties, speed up land claims process and recognize Aboriginal nations. 3) The feds should negotiate a Canada-wide, pan-Aboriginal framework agreement for restructuring. 4) Aboriginal nations should be assisted to begin nation-building, by developing institutions, determining membership etc. 5) All governments should prepare to enter into a new treaty process. 6) Governments should redistribute land and resources in a more equitable way for First Nations. 7) Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments should work together to stimulate on-reserve economic development.

**Method/Approach**

Like most Royal Commissions drawing upon a large number of diverse scholars, the methods are mixed, and a single epistemological approach is difficult to identify. There is arguably some minimal movement in RCAP towards the adoption of Indigenous methods. RCAP declares itself to be “a significant step forward in encouraging culturally based approaches to research and stimulating research that represents Aboriginal experience, society and history in ways that are authenticated by Aboriginal people themselves (Appendix C).”

**Contributions:**

Though RCAP has affected relatively little of the public policy change it demanded, it is a watershed document in the study of Aboriginal politics in Canada. It's single most important contribution is popularizing the notion of nation to nation as an organizing principle of Aboriginal-Canadian relations. Thomas Flanagan later alleges that this construction of Indigenous issues using the language of nationalism marks a stunning, modern success in the development of Aboriginal politics (and the entrenchment of the “Aboriginal orthodoxy”). It's prescription of what Alan Cairns calls “parallelism” is another important contribution. Neither are necessarily novel ideas – both had persisted in the Indigenous scholarship for some time. RCAP was seen as elevating these ideas to the mainstream, however.

Both elements have provoked considerable debate. Cairns and Flanagan wrote their books chiefly in response to the deficiencies they perceive in the final report of RCAP. Alfred also takes issue, at least implicitly, with RCAP, though obviously from a dramatically different angle. RCAP, then, is a kind of cornerstone to the subsequent decade of debate about Aboriginal affairs.