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Gambling with the Future: The Evolution of Aboriginal Gaming in Canada

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By Yale D. Belanger. (2006). Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing Ltd., 232 pp., ISBN: 1-895830-28-1 (paperback only). Price: \$31 CDN.

There is little literature that describes the nature of Aboriginal gaming in early Canada and the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in Canada. Likewise, there is very little research that examines the effects of such gambling in Canada, including the effects of lotteries, bingo, casinos, video lottery terminals, and Internet gambling. Accordingly, Yale Belanger's book is a welcome and very important contribution to understanding the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in Canada.

Following an introduction that frames the aim and content of the book, the first three chapters provide valuable historical information. The first chapter provides a historical perspective of Aboriginal gaming and early Canadian gambling policy. In this chapter, the reader learns that Aboriginal gaming was an important part of the Aboriginal culture. The second chapter provides a concise and very useful description of the evolution of Canadian gambling legislation. The third chapter offers a valuable description of the social, political, and economic context for the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in Canada. Throughout the next four chapters, Belanger provides a focused description of the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in the United States, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. The last two chapters describe the social and political responses to Aboriginal high-stakes gambling and recent developments. The book

concludes with a chapter that suggests there is room for optimism.

Aboriginal gaming was culturally accepted and community oriented, and it served as an entertaining and, perhaps, unifying set of activities before Europeans came to Canada. Aboriginal gaming and wagering involved many activities, including bowl games, straw games, counting games, and lacrosse and other sports-related activities. Gaming was pursued for social, spiritual, and cultural interaction purposes. As all aspects of Aboriginal life and culture were adversely affected by the arrival of Europeans in Canada, so too was Aboriginal gaming. Aboriginal gaming was attacked by missionaries, settlers, and government officials. The European settlers brought with them moralistic, Puritan views of gambling and were critical of “primitive” and “pagan” Aboriginal gaming. After Confederation, the federal government prohibited gambling in Canada through the Criminal Code and the Indian Act.

The acceptance and expansion of high-stakes gambling in Canada are relatively recent developments, as is the parallel development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling. The legalization of gambling in Canada took place in 1969, and the regulation of gambling was passed along to the provinces in 1985. As the history of the treatment of Aboriginal people in Canada is not pretty, neither is the story of Aboriginal gaming and high-stakes gambling in Canada. When the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling began to be sought, resistance came from the general public and the provincial governments that regulate gambling. In spite of the considerable difficulties and delays, the first five Aboriginal casinos opened in 1996.

The main strength of Belanger's book lies in its description of the development of high-stakes Aboriginal gambling in Canada within a social, political, and economic context. The treatment and plight of Aboriginal people in Canada are known to have been very poor. Although there have been some economic development initiatives, these efforts have not produced much improvement. In the 1970s, there was considerable discussion of the value of self-government for Aboriginal communities. All parties understood that the success of the quest for self-government would need to be accompanied by significant economic development. The legalization of gambling in Canada, the development of high-stakes gambling by some American Indian tribes, and the acceptance of the aims of self-government, nation building, and economic development for Aboriginal people provided the context within which Aboriginal high-stakes gambling could be pursued and developed in Canada. At least some First Nations communities in most Canadian provinces have seized the opportunity.

Belanger's book reports that there were eight Aboriginal casinos operating in Canada at the time of its writing: four in Saskatchewan, one in Ontario, two in Manitoba, and one in British Columbia. There are provincial agreements in Nova

Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, and Quebec that permit Aboriginal communities to operate video lottery terminals, hold bingos, and sell lottery tickets on reserves. In Quebec, the Mohawks of Kahnawake play host to Internet casinos with little interference from the provincial government.

Although Aboriginal high-stakes gambling enterprises generate much-needed revenue, employ Aboriginal people, and share revenues with First Nations communities, the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling looks more like the adoption of the high-stakes, profit-seeking gambling model that has been led by the provincial governments in Canada and less like an “evolution” of the culturally accepted, “authentic,” and “pure” Aboriginal gaming that was previously practised within Aboriginal communities by Aboriginal people. Aboriginal high-stakes gambling enterprises do not use Aboriginal games. Aboriginal casinos offer the same games as non-Aboriginal casinos and, to be successful, Aboriginal casinos are known to depend on outside non-Aboriginal populations and sometimes utilize outside management services.

Lest we consider the “evolution” of Aboriginal gaming in terms that are too noble, keep in mind that the provincial governments also claim that high-stakes gambling produces revenue, creates employment, and shares revenue with the public. It is worth noting that the resistance of Aboriginal casinos to provincial smoking bans places profits ahead of the public health interests of employees and patrons, and the resistance to unionization places profits ahead of the interests of employees, many of whom are Aboriginal workers. Whereas Belanger does not refer to the presence of significant gambling problems from early Aboriginal gaming, there is growing evidence that a greater proportion of Aboriginal people experience gambling problems from high-stakes gambling than do members of non-Aboriginal populations.

Belanger's book is a very important contribution to understanding the development of high-stakes gambling in Canada and Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in Canada. The book is well researched and well referenced. The book tells the story of the development of high-stakes gambling by some Aboriginal communities in Canada, but it is a story that needs continued documentation and evaluation. There is still plenty of room for more literature and more research.

This book is essential reading for those who want to understand the nature of culturally accepted Aboriginal gaming, the development of high-stakes gambling in Canada, and the development of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in Canada. Accordingly, the book should be read by students, researchers, policy personnel, and the variety of other people who are involved in gambling-related fields. Of particular interest to researchers and policy-makers, the last chapter ends with a significant list of some of the unanswered questions on the effects of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling. Perhaps the author's optimism, suggested in the subtitle to

the conclusion (“Room for Optimism”), will be found in the results of the much-needed research on the effects of Aboriginal high-stakes gambling in Canada.

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