

NEWS LEADER & PICTORIAL

Time ripe for B.C.'s Natives to end their dance with dependency

By Tom Fletcher
Feb 17 2007

To millions of people around the world, last year's land use plan for the central and north coast is a nice story about "saving the Great Bear Rainforest."

For B.C. residents, it's the biggest aboriginal land settlement in the province's history, as well as one of its biggest park dedications. It hands substantial control over an area twice the size of Belgium to remote coastal Native communities, and does it without a treaty.

For Art Sterritt of the North Coast First Nations and his Central Coast counterpart, Dallas Smith, it's about one last chance to save their civilization.

B.C.'s impressive job creation numbers don't mean much in Sterritt's hometown of Hartley Bay, or the people Smith represents in Alert Bay or Bella Bella. While populous areas of B.C. enjoy full employment, and the employment rate for off-reserve aboriginals has increased to 58.5 per cent, central coast communities still have unemployment of 70 to 80 per cent. On the north coast it's worse.

Pilot projects are underway for shellfish farms and low-impact logging. Log harvesting can extend even into the protected areas, which will continue to be a source of monumental cedar for traditional use. With little fuss, last year the forests ministry issued a log export licence to the Heltsiuk First Nation to help establish a log sort north of Bella Bella that will enable small-scale commercial logging.

The need for jobs is more urgent than the usual gripes over logging, or log exports. The reasons why are vividly set out in a new book called **Dances With Dependency**, by a North Coast aboriginal lawyer named Calvin Helin.

Helin doesn't pull any punches in recounting aboriginal life. He details how aboriginal populations are rising rapidly at a time when the general population is aging. A resource boom centred on northern and western Canada means the aboriginal workforce is urgently needed. And if aboriginal people don't go to work to support themselves, they and their culture might not be the only thing destroyed. The welfare burden could wreck Canada's economy in the coming years.

Helin says things no non-aboriginal person could get away with. He caustically describes the "Indian industry" and chiefs who have defined their whole mission as extracting welfare money from the Canadian government. After meticulously relating the rise of the Indian Act, residential schools and their corrosive effect on generations of families, he writes:

"A less charitable view of what has happened is that the whole welfare trap and its impacts have made indigenous people fat, slow, lazy and as many youth now argue, stupid. It is not very likely that the current crop of indigenous people could compete with their own vigorous ancestors."

The book doesn't directly mention B.C.'s new relationship, with millions invested for capacity building, forest tenure agreements and so forth. But it endorses such strategies as the only ones that will work, along with the creation of true property rights and aboriginal governments that encourage entrepreneurial activity instead of trying to run everything themselves.

Helin's book is above all a challenge for aboriginal people to recover pride and self-sufficiency. It deserves to be widely read by politicians, and by aboriginal leaders as well.

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