

Dances with Dependency, Heinz Lippuner

(at: *Economic Development for Amerindians*, [http://www.edai-ch.org/ENGLISH/REVIEWS/reviews.html](http://www.edai.ch.org/ENGLISH/REVIEWS/reviews.html))

EDAI would like to draw your attention to a book, written by Calvin Helin and published in 2006: *Dances with Dependency*. Calvin Helin is a lawyer, and more importantly, son of Barry Helin of the Royal House of Gitlan, and of Verna Helin, matron of the Royal House of Gitachn'geek. In other words: Calvin Helin is not just an academic, but as a full-blooded Native Canadian knows exactly what he is talking about when it comes to the economic and social situation of his Indian brothers and sisters.

In a metaphoric way the author follows the route of what he calls a canoe in the ocean of all events in the Americas of the last 10'000 years. In his view this canoe was paddled by Indigenous peoples through hundreds of decades in a self-sufficient way of life, in prosperity, and in social and political autonomy. This lasted until the canoe was thrown into the "colonial storm" which started with the invasion of North America by European traders and then settlers at the beginning of the 17th century.

The Europeans called the land they invaded "Terra nullius", land not inhabited or at least not under control of what ever Indigenous society. Therefore they thought they had every right to take over, and to impose their social and political criteria on all peoples they met and sometimes defeated by force on their way through the continent. Their tools of colonizing them were the gun, trinkets, and law and policy. The latter ended during the 20th century in different attempts of dismantling the Indigenous societies and cultures, and to assimilating them into the mainstream of the white majority both in the United States and Canada. On these developments of the last 400 years Calvin Helin focuses his attention.

As a Native person living in British Columbia Helin's view is focussed on the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada, stating "notwithstanding the fact that the colonial era ended with the formation of Canada" as a state, "the policies of the colonial period continue to be applied today" on the first inhabitants of the country. In a short overview he characterizes the system of exploitation of land and peoples by the British colonists (pp. 88-92). In summary the Victorian view assumed that "Aboriginals were inferior peoples, [...] unable to govern themselves", that "European ideas about progress and development were self-evidently correct and could be imposed on Aboriginal peoples without reference to any other values and opinions". Canada as inheritor of the British ruling would take over these attitudes, stating that "Canadian authorities knew best how to protect" the "well-being" of Native peoples.

Therefore Canada imposed the Indian Act on Native peoples (1876) in order to ensure that they would operate "within the accepted economic structure" and would "not become a source of disorder". As wards of the federal authorities they therefore would be under control even in their daily life. Helin summarizes all the impacts of the Indian Act, including the boarding school system (pp. 93-100). The result of all attempts to "civilize" Native peoples is in his view "the welfare trap".

Despite the fiduciary obligation towards First Nations the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs often actively promoted welfare dependency. Instead of complying with their duty to act in the best interests of Native peoples and communities the bureaucrats were actively discouraging self-reliance and destroying self-sufficiency. As an example he mentions how Indian bands in the prairies highly interested in agriculture systematically were kept at a permanent disadvantage in comparison to their white farming neighbours: "Federal agents took control of every aspect of the Indian reserves, often leasing out the best land at cheap rents to local white farmers, and required the Indians to get an official permit if they wanted to sell grain, buy cattle, or even to leave the reserve for a day." Indian families were limited to 40 acres of farm land, white farmers were getting 160 acres. Etc. etc. (pp. 108-110). This "colonial subjugation" resulted in "learned helplessness" of the afflicted Native peoples, and finally threw them into the welfare trap. Unable to develop economic independence Indian families had to rely on the monthly paycheque issued by the federal authorities.

The economic impacts of the colonial system are: First, practically no private business activities exist on reserves. Second, the paycheque system puts people into full economic dependency of the government as the provider for their daily needs. This also has an influence on social and even political matters on reserves: mismanagement, nepotism, corruption, and abuse of power are the results when governments distribute money according to their rules. Helin notices proof after proof of this state of affairs (pp. 141-159). At the very end the financial resources intended for Native peoples are sucked up by consultants and lawyers, the "Indian misery industry" (pp. 160-161).

After describing how Native cultures and communities were put in disarray Helin shows "a way out of the storm". The "agenda for action" to get out of "grievance to develop mode" is impressively laid out over some one hundred pages. It starts with "asking the right questions" which means: "Simply asking the government for more money without addressing the fundamental causal issues will never lead to a solution", or: "as long as Aboriginal people do not control their own purse strings, those who do will control Aboriginal people's destiny". Aboriginal problems can never be solved by money alone. The future of Aboriginal nations does not depend on how much money / cash Chiefs are successful in extracting from the government: "in going forward, Aboriginal people must understand the realities of their ancestors' success and self-reliance over millennia - a foundation of independence, interdependence, self-discipline, ethical leadership, and cultural cooperation." Helin's conclusion: Aboriginal peoples MUST engage in the process of creating their own wealth, **THEY HAVE TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR PROBLEMS** in order to take ownership of their future.

BUT: HOW can Aboriginal peoples achieve these goals? Helin summarizes some economic models to build on: examples from New Zealand's Maori (pp. 217-226), and from Alaska via United States to Canada (pp. 226-238). Obviously it can be done, if clear decisions have been made to develop strategic plans as well as by repatriating critical tribal members, well educated and with experience in government and industry. But first of all strong, ethical leadership, and community consensus to move forward toward economic self-reliance is needed. Helin's request is: Wai Wah = Tsimshian expression for Just do it!

Helin's examples lead to some questions: They are focussed on corporate economic development, where General Motors, McDonalds and other big companies are involved. Are there no other possibilities than big business? In contrast to Helin's case studies Robert B. Anderson lists and describes small and medium scale enterprises involved in sustainable, even fair trade activities in his book *Economic Development among the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The Hope for the Future* (1999).

For Helin there is also another difficult problem: the way forward for Urban Aboriginals, the "strangers in a strange land". In Helin's view the most important issue for them is to retain connections to their home communities. But in addition to that education on elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels, and training as professionals, entrepreneurs, and tradesmen is needed. The city-based Aboriginal community liaison workers are important in linking together school staffs, entrepreneurs, business managers, administrators and Aboriginal families (pp. 239-252). In any case Canada has to find a solution to avoid or manage the "demographic tsunami": From 1951 to 2001 the growth of its inhabitants is a dramatic one, with the Aboriginal population growing sevenfold, while the Canadian population in total only doubled. Even more dramatic: The Aboriginal population is not only growing more rapidly, but is much younger: 33% of the children under 14 years of age are Natives, and only 19% of the same age range are Non-Aboriginals. These facts will lead to the "economic time bomb", as by 2025 at the latest "Canada's population of seniors 65 and older could be more than double the number of children under 15". The effects on employment and unemployment, on the pension plans and Medicare system and therefore on taxes and on the financial situation of the country as a whole would be gigantic. The urgent need for labour for Aboriginal peoples has to be noticed now, as Canada's prosperity in the future will depend on how successful Canadians will be in achieving enduring results in the labour market for Aboriginal peoples. The alarm bells are ringing, demanding for developing economic projects that will pay for Canada's future: "We can accept the status quo and do nothing, or we can seize the unprecedented opportunity for both Aboriginal youth and corporate Canada. [...] It is now an economic imperative - businesses, unions and governments need to consider all sources of skilled workers and ensure the retention and development of human resources." (pp. 43-61)

Finally and according to the understanding of the international community about human rights the archaic Indian Act system of governance has to be given up. That is a **MUST FOR CANADA** as a state, as a member of the international community, as an advocate of really democratic social and political conditions also for Indigenous peoples, which in my view has not been achieved up to now.