

# A Roadmap for Aboriginal Self-reliance

by Tom Flanagan

The only hope for Aboriginal communities to move forward ... is to begin creating their own wealth. And the private sector is the most efficient forum for the creation of that wealth. (p. 134)

It is time for indigenous people to stop dwelling on the rancorous injustices of the past ... we cannot do anything about history. Our actions now, however, can impact the future. (p. 264)

**T**hese quotations convey the spirit of Calvin Helin's book, *Dances with Dependency: Indigenous Success through Self-Reliance*. Helin, a Tsimshian lawyer and businessman, speaks for a small but growing section of the aboriginal community that espouses self-reliance, open and democratic self-government, and progress through integration into the Canadian economy.

Helin is especially convincing when he writes about the contemporary explosion of aboriginal entrepreneurship

manifested in shopping centres, industrial parks, residential developments, golf courses, casinos, and other projects. Many First Nations have valuable assets that can be leveraged into productive businesses. Some have fertile agricultural land, productive forests, or valuable deposits of oil, gas, and minerals. Others are strategically situated close to or even within cities, so that location alone makes their land valuable. Still others may be far from metropolitan areas but near scenic travel destinations such as the Rocky Mountains or northern lakes.

Admittedly, a better property-rights framework would be helpful; projects on Indian reserves are often slower and more expensive to complete because lawyers must develop elaborate contractual provisions to protect lenders and outside investors. But in spite of the obstacles, aboriginal entrepreneurship is

happening today on a large scale in many different settings across Canada.

Although certainly to be welcomed, aboriginal entrepreneurship does run the risk of enriching the well-connected, business-oriented elite while leaving the majority of native people in poverty. Most Canadians are employed by others; they are not entrepreneurs or business owners. The same is bound to be true for most Indians, Métis, and Inuit, especially because their birth rates are much higher than those of other Cana-

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dian demographic groups. Young people usually have to spend some time in the work force before they can even begin to think about becoming entrepreneurs.

Helin draws attention to this issue with his tsunami metaphor. "The huge 'greying' mainstream baby boom population



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(representing one-third of the population of Canada) may be combining with the rapidly-growing indigenous population in an immense demographic tsunami capable of swamping the finances of the country if corrective measures are not taken immediately.” It is not only a challenge but an opportunity. Canada cannot forever afford to support growing numbers of unemployed aboriginal people, while those growing numbers can help to fill Canada’s ever increasing need for workers.

Most obviously in Alberta, but also in some other places in Canada, there is a desperate labour shortage, so that businesses are using temporary permits to import workers from Mexico, China, Russia, and elsewhere. It ought to be a marvelous opportunity for previously unemployed aboriginal people to break into the workforce.

Indeed, some of the entrepreneurial success stories that Helin describes involve a large element of labour contracting. In the oil sands of Alberta and the diamond mines of the Northwest Territories, the Fort MacKay and the Tlicho First Nations have set up companies employing their own people to provide labour services such as construction, snow

removal, site maintenance, driving, and catering.

Perhaps this model could be imitated more widely. For example, more than 10,000 people, many of them unemployed, live on Indian reserves that are an easy drive from the red-hot labour

market of Calgary. Why are employers paying to bring in workers from far-away places such as the Philippines when there are pools of potential workers much closer to hand?

Unfortunately, many intractable factors discourage reserve residents from entering the work force. The reserve offers tax-exempt status, welfare payments, and free or low-cost housing (to those who can get it), so a resident may well become worse off by moving to town and taking an entry-level job. Traditional tribal cultures, which do not generally include the concept of regular work hours in a hierarchically structured workforce, are also a problem.

Another cultural issue is the tendency to rely heavily on the support of kin, which is sometimes associated with outright discouragement of self-improvement through formal education and work experience. Helin illustrates the dilemma with an apocryphal story about a white crab fisherman who sweats to make sure his crabs don’t escape from the bucket and an Indian fisherman who doesn’t worry about his crabs getting out. “They are Indian crabs,” says the Indian fisherman. “Whenever one tries to climb out, the rest pull him back down” (p. 125).

Changes in government policy can address the perverse incentives of the reserve system, but native people themselves will have to tackle their cultural issues, following the lead of pioneers like Calvin Helin. 

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