

If you can believe it, I moved to Montreal for the wave. Well, the wave and the women, but mainly the wave.

Surfer dude Corran Addison, a native of Durban, South Africa, on surfing in the St. Lawrence River. A7

COMMENT

Time for an aboriginal 'glasnost,' author says



ROY MacGREGOR
THIS COUNTRY

rmacgregor@globeandmail.com

Wai wah! That's "Just do it!" in the language of Calvin Helin's people, the Tsimshian of the northern coasts of British Columbia.

The young lawyer hasn't adopted the Nike motto to sell running shoes, but he'd still like to apply it to putting the boots to a few things in this country.

Like native welfare.

Like the Big Brother control that Ottawa has over aboriginals.

Like the "Indian Industry" he sees where the only ones profiting from despair and poverty are non-aboriginal consultants and various aboriginal leaders.

What Helin has done is self-publish a book, *Dances With Dependency: Indigenous Success Through Self-reliance*, that treats aboriginal sacred cows pretty much the way white sports hunters used to treat prairie buffalo — take it down, and move on to the next one.

Good thing, perhaps, that Calvin Helin is also a master in martial arts.

"I was pulling back the shower curtain on the naked Indian," he says from his B.C. home. "Quite honestly, I thought I'd get the crap kicked out of me.

"But exactly the opposite has happened."

Instead, Helin's book — available through www.spiritorca.com — has become a bit of a seller, with orders coming in from around the country as well as other countries with pressing aboriginal issues.

The Canadian government



B.C. First Nations Summit Grand Chief Ed John with then-prime minister Paul Martin after signing the Kelowna Accord. ADRIAN WYLD/CP

might want to bring a few boxes to Ottawa, as well.

What Helin is calling for is "an Aboriginal 'glasnost'" similar to what Mikhail Gorbachev brought to the Soviet Union. He wants nothing to be beyond discussion, whether it be the vested interest of politicians involved in aboriginal affairs or the nagging stereotype of the lazy aboriginal who prefers welfare to work.

He is particularly tough on chiefs across the country, charging that a great many have no interest in anything but "keeping the gravy train going."

He is, surprisingly, no great fan of the Kelowna Accord struck by the previous Liberal government, an agreement reached by the various levels of government that would have seen \$5-billion directed into aboriginal education and the eradication of poverty.

Poverty is also a priority with Helin, but for him the accord doesn't go far enough. "Unless you have a blueprint, a plan," he says, "you're just dumping money down a hole again."

In his opinion, the federal government's \$9-billion-a-year commitment to aboriginals is

an obvious failure: "If money could solve the problem, then the hundreds of millions that have been thrown at the problem would have done something, wouldn't it?"

"As long as we are expecting someone to take care of our problems, we're going to continue to get what we're getting."

Helin grew up in the coastal village of Lax Kw'alaams and, thanks to a generous teacher and the teacher's parents, was educated in the Lower Mainland. He has been a commercial fisherman — one swamped by high interest rates in the 1980s — and now describes himself as a "driven" lawyer.

In his book, he talks about the three "waves" that are the history of Canadian aboriginals. The first is arrival and settlement; the second the European "discovery" of this continent; the third the past century or so that has seen aboriginals move from a life of self-sufficiency to one of government dependency — the "welfare trap."

What Helin is calling for is a fourth "wave" that has to do with responsible government, elected leadership, resource control and, ultimately, the ability to stand alone.

He agrees with H. L. Menck-en, who once said: "Economic independence is the foundation of the only sort of freedom worth a damn."

"Self-generated wealth," Helin says, "is critical to Aboriginal aspirations of self-government. Without a revenue source independent of the federal government, Aboriginal communities will continue to be trapped in the cycle of poverty."

What he hopes to begin, by raising questions few would dare raise, is a profound change in mindset. This country is ripe for change, he argues. Land settlements are providing a huge base and sensible resource development offers huge opportunity.

But it must be seized. The other aboriginal reality, he says, is a demographic tsunami "second only to global warming" in its coming effect on Canada. Native population growth that is twice the national average.

"We've got to open our blooming eyes here," he says. "It's crazy. We are willingly walking the plank."

"But is this a crisis or an opportunity? To me, it's an opportunity we cannot afford not to take."

His book, he says, is simply an invitation to get people talking about matters they might otherwise avoid. And he believes that invitation is being accepted.

"The bottom line," he says, "is people are fed up with the situation — because it's not going anywhere."

"The fact is, we've got to look after ourselves. We have to be able to stand up in the world — because there's not another one."

"We need to hear what our grandparents would tell us — 'Get off your ass and do something.'"

Or, in more modern parlance, "Wai wah!"