

A new native leadership calls for self-help

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WAKAW, SASK -- For all its supposed generosity, Jim Flaherty's 2007 budget left a lot of people off the books. It was a depressing day for Canada's beleaguered aboriginal people, who saw meagre commitments and no sign of the \$5-billion promised in Paul Martin's 2005 Kelowna Accord.

But realistically, the Conservatives can't fix Canada's shameful Third World by just adding more cash to the pot, any more than the Liberals could. Without additional support on the ground from visionary native leaders and their capable people, we won't see a dramatic turnaround in our lifetime.

Despite the private member's bill that passed this week imploring the government to reinstate it, the Kelowna Accord is dead, and the nagging question of chronic poverty on reserves and among urban natives remains unanswered.

But there's a self-help movement afoot that may hold the key to a revitalization program to address our shared national embarrassment. Some ambitious aboriginal leaders are embracing the entrepreneurial way in order to develop their communities. With their own revenues, native people can address the complex social problems in their midst -- without relying completely on government help.

A Senate report released this week, *Sharing Canada's Prosperity: A Hand Up, Not a Hand Out*, points to the business sector as the future for the growing community.

For 2½ years, a special Senate committee studied the issue of aboriginal economic development. Its findings were made public this week: "A hand up, not a hand out, is especially critical to the future prosperity of the Canadian prairies where 62 per cent of Canada's nearly one million aboriginal people live and represent an important political presence," it concluded.

The committee's chair, Senator Gerry St. Germain, said the future of the West is linked to the success of its aboriginal residents. He called for more education and skills in order to build a vital native economy.

Although aboriginal business people face many more barriers than white Canadians, there are plenty of good-news stories to validate the benefits of economic development.

In September, 2006, Tom Morris of Wasaya Airways in Northwestern Ontario told his company's story to the senators. In 1987, when his community, the Big Trout First Nation, launched an airline, it had \$49 in start-up funds. In 2005, its revenues were in excess of \$50-million. But it wasn't easy.

"Typical stereotyping of first nations by Canadians is one issue that we face on a daily basis. When we met with financial institutions, it was as if they, too, were expecting us to fail in whatever we proposed. Through our determination, we have proven these stereotypes false and established a model for others to follow," Mr. Morris said.

The committee's deputy chair, Senator Nick Sibbeston, said he would like to balance out the mainstream view of his people: "Those [business] success stories would surprise the vast majority of Canadians who only hear about the Davis Inlets and Kashechewans of the aboriginal world."

In order to create more successful ventures, B.C. native lawyer Calvin Helin says, aboriginal people have to change their way of thinking. They have become too reliant on transfer payments and are often their own worst enemies, he says.

His new book, *Dances with Dependency*, airs the dirty laundry of addiction, dependency and listlessness with one purpose: He wants native people to move forward by reclaiming traditional values of autonomy and self-reliance.

Mr. Helin wants to shift his people's focus from grievance to independence through education and economic development. He says the current handout model is unsustainable as the native population continues to grow.

The time is right for a native economy. As the small towns of my province of Saskatchewan continue to empty out, our reserves actually grew by 11 per cent from 2001 to 2005. The average age of a status Indian in Canada is 25, compared with 35 for all Canadians. With Canada's aging baby-boomer population and an ongoing labour shortage, employment opportunities for native youth have never been better.

But because of poverty, social dysfunction and a reliance on welfare, not all of these people work. Native Canadians have a 19.1-per-cent national unemployment rate.

If more bands begin to trade in goods and services instead of in demands for government money, their communities stand to benefit. Fiscal independence may hold the key to self-government.

Chief Clarence Louie's Osoyoos Indian band in B.C.'s south Okanagan is a perfect case study in self-reliance. The band has created a thriving premium-wine business, Nk'Mip Cellars. It also operates a four-star hotel.

In mid-March, Mr. Louie shared his winning strategies with a packed house in the commerce department at the University of Saskatchewan. His message was frank: "It's called the economy, stupid!"

Mr. Louie pointed out to the attentive audience that less than a fifth of government money for aboriginal programs is dedicated to economic development.

"Every first nation comes from a working culture. Our ancestors worked hard for a living. Today, life is as messed up or as complicated as you make it. To improve your quality of life, you either get an education or get a job.

"Words without action, excuses and blame lead towards more welfare dependency and poverty," Mr. Louie said. It's time, he proclaimed, for native people to move forward and join the economy.

"You call yourself a warrior? Warriors don't sleep till noon," said the Dr. Phil of the Okanagan.

Patricia Robertson is a Saskatchewan journalist.