

KOHA

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UN-ITED
NATIONS
FOR
NATIVE
TRADE?



CONTENTS



KOHA MEDIA LAUNCH 06

What recession? New media venture aims to take Māori global.

BIOFARM ORGANIC 08

BioFarm yoghurt brings a new bottom line to the meaning of organics.

DANCES WITH DEPENDENCY 10

Calvin Helin of the Tsimshian Nation provides a road map out of poverty.

SLICE OF HEAVEN 14

Huka Pak eye Singapore and Malaysia markets for Te Awanui kiwifruit brand.

HOROIRANGI 16

New centre of aquaculture innovation set to inspire the genesis of genius.

YOUNG, GIFTED & BROWN 19

Revolutionary new medical treatment a billion dollar winner.

UNITED FOR NATIVE TRADE? 20

Koha considers rights based framework for inter-indigenous trade.

TE WAIARIKI 24

Blue is the new gold. Are Māori ready to utilise these treasures of history?

CHINA KNOCKING 28

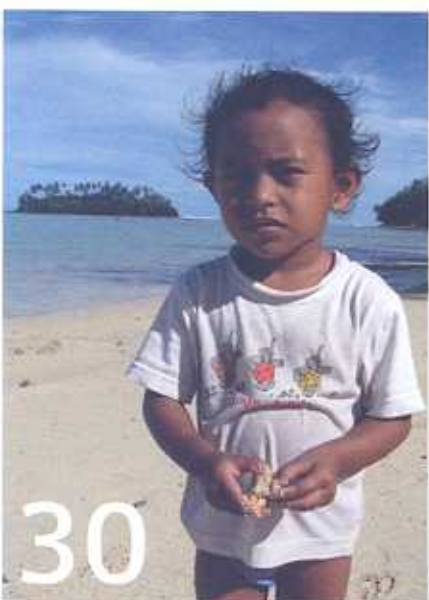
How the NZ-China FTA can benefit Māori exporters.

HAWAIIKI CALLING 30

Koha travels to Rarotonga to find investment opportunities between Māori.

TURE Māori 36

FoMA comments on the unresolved issue of Māori water ownership.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURA LAYSHON



Calvin Klein, author of *Dances with Dependency*.

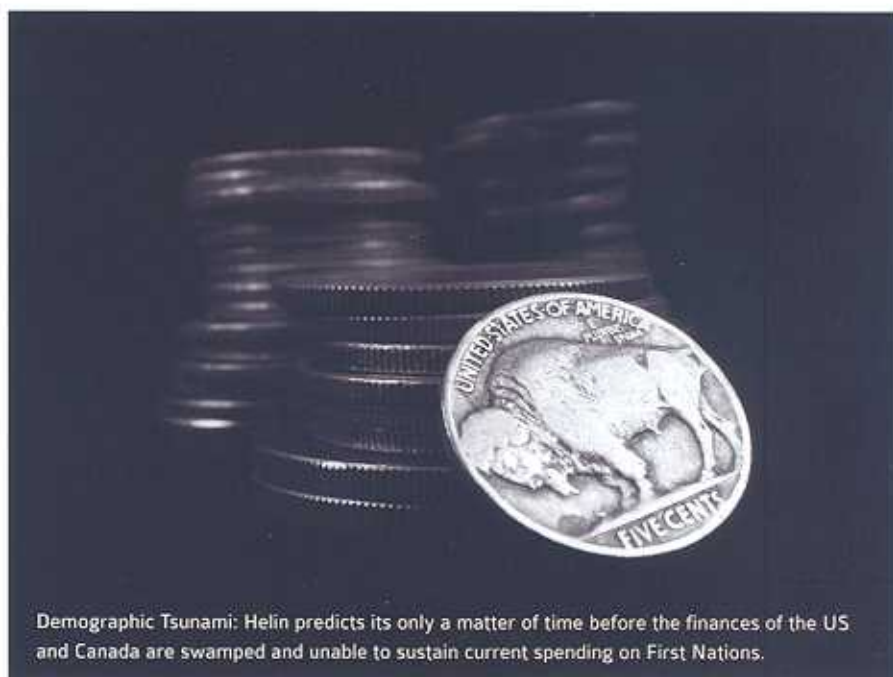
DANCES WITH DEPENDENCY

Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance

BY MERE TAKOKO

In the face of fatigued 'warrior gene' theories that offer little more to a poor man than a sinker at the bottom of a fish pond comes a new tell-all book by Canadian Aboriginal author, Calvin Helin, of the Tsimshian Nation. *Dances with Dependency*, yet to be released in Aotearoa, examines First Nation dependency on the federal government in both the U.S. and Canada. Painting a picture of the fall of indigenous peoples from self-reliant and profoundly spiritual societies to nations at the mercy of federal transfer payments, Helin argues that without self-generated wealth they will continue to have little control over their destiny.

Some US\$18 billion in federal payments are transferred to First Nations in Canada annually. At a time when millions of baby boomers are set to retire and where U.S. and Canadian foreign debt is spiraling out of control, Helin shows how it's only a matter of time before both countries' finances are exhausted. Add to that the rapidly growing legions of poor people relying on expensive government 'entitlement crumbs' and Helin says you have a formula for a fiscal 'demographic tsunami' on a scale never before seen. With serious concerns about Ottawa and Washington D.C.'s ability to sustain its spending on indigenous communities the question posed by *Dances with Dependency* is: will indigenous reserve communities sink even further down the totem pole or recognise an unprecedented opportunity to achieve meaningful self-government?



Demographic Tsunami: Helin predicts its only a matter of time before the finances of the US and Canada are swamped and unable to sustain current spending on First Nations.

By taking readers on a symbolic canoe journey through 10,000 years of history, *Dances with Dependency* travels through the ages in which indigenous peoples in the US and Canada led a self-sufficient way of life; a life epitomized by great leaders such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. At the famous Great Battle of Little Big Horn these two fearless Lakota Chiefs led one of the greatest resistance campaigns against the United States to defend sacred hunting grounds and to resist government efforts to place their people on reservations. Both leaders rejected the very notion of reservation life with Sitting Bull stating: "if we must die, we die defending our rights." Today, almost 50% of First Nations peoples live on reserves and are largely dependent on transfer payments or welfare. It's a world far removed from the vision that Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse had for their people, says Helin.

From a life of prosperity and social and political autonomy, he shows readers how the First Nations' canoe was unceremoniously diverted off course by the "colonial storm" which started with the invasion of Europeans at the beginning of the 17th century. The colonial military learnt very early that to control indigenous peoples they first had to systematically destroy their economies. Isolated and economically dependent on federal transfer payments, instead of rising up to fight against the colonists they were relegated to fighting with themselves. From the extermination of the buffalo to the introduction of the Indian Act, the intent of subsequent government policy was to replace traditional leadership, take control of valuable resources, reserve finances and impose Western

BUFFALO NATIONS



The buffalo or bison was central to the Native economy and the spiritual world view that cemented social, cultural and political life. In the early nineteenth century, over 50 million buffalo roamed the Great Plains of the continental U.S. The enormous herds dominated the landscape with early accounts commenting that it took five days to pass a single herd.

By 1871 as a result of a desperate attempt to settle the Plains Indian Nations on reservations to make way for pending railroad developments and an insatiable settler demand for land, the military embarked on a deliberate campaign to exterminate the magnificent animals. The military was acutely aware that a substantial decline in buffalo would pose a serious setback to the ability of indigenous peoples to resist US expansion.

*With the near extermination of the buffalo by the turn of the century, indigenous peoples were forced to move to reservations where they quickly became wards of the state. Author of *Dances with Dependency*, Calvin Helin, argues that subsequent U.S. policy has continued to displace traditional means of economic self-reliance through the widespread promotion of federal dependency. Helin argues the solution for setting a path out of poverty for indigenous peoples rests in education and promoting a thriving private sector to create own-source revenue streams for First Nations communities.*

systems of land tenure. *Dances with Dependency* paints a portrait of the resulting social and political chaos that all attempts to 'civilize' Native peoples have created, a state of affairs that is perpetuated by what Helin describes as "the welfare trap."

Despite their fiduciary obligations, Helin argues the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs have actively discouraged self-reliance. After citing a number of examples where federal agents have leased out prime reservation land at below market rates to non-indigenous farmers, he shows how outdated government bureaucracies are in keeping indigenous peoples at a permanent disadvantage. "That kind of thinking is still part of the colonial hang over," says Helin. Without a private sector on most reservations, poor

management of Native resources is the norm and is exacerbated by an equally outdated governance system. The focus of the federal government, in his view, must be on assisting indigenous governments to develop 'own-source' revenue streams.

"Government policy and legislation has remained largely unchanged over 200 years. This has left a governance structure that is unfair, often oppressive to indigenous grassroots folks, and poses huge barriers to moving tribes forward," says Helin.

Beyond the punches this book delivers to consultants and some indigenous leaders who he says are living off the "Indian misery industry" by perpetuating a dependency mindset, one of the most powerful messages of *Dances with Dependency* is that

sovereignty, nation-building and economic development must go hand-in-hand. Without a strategy for financial independence, any talk of self-government is simply political puffery, he adds. "Can you imagine one of the old chiefs like Sitting Bull placing the destiny of his people in the hands of a bureaucracy 5000 miles away? The simple fact is if federal powers continue to control the purse strings, they will continue to control Aboriginal leaders and their communities no matter how much smoke is shoveled by politicians to argue otherwise."

While Helin outlines the history of colonial subjugation experienced by indigenous peoples in North America, he also says the time for grievance is over and that asking for more money will not help to overcome the social and political pathologies facing Indian country today. Throwing political correctness to the wind he challenges indigenous peoples to quit 'belly aching' and cut the apron strings with Washington D.C. and Ottawa. The first step on the road to doing so, he says, is to "get out of grievance mode and into development mode." And that is precisely what he hopes tribal leaders will do by focusing their attention away from extracting welfare from the federal government to developing a self-reliant economic base. In moving forward, he believes indigenous peoples must find ways to build viable business sectors and attract investment to their communities.

"What's needed is a nation-building approach in which both businesses and human beings can thrive. And that will never happen as long as indigenous peoples believe that engaging in business compromises our cultures and indigenosity," says Helin.

Dances with Dependency is a book that is set to accelerate a discourse among indigenous peoples that is not about assigning blame on the government but about moving communities forward. And, as Helin shows, there are other potential economic models that communities in North America could consider including Māori. In fact, he dedicates almost a chapter to showing how the value of the Māori economy has almost trebled since the 1980s. After looking at government reforms such as devolution and privatization, he says Māori were forced to move further ahead in the 'development/economic integration curve.' Add to that a conscious focus on education, traditional culture, language and identity, and Māori just may provide a potential map to build on.

While there are differences, Māori have endured a similar colonial history to First Nations communities and suffer from similar social pathologies such as high crime, domestic abuse and welfare dependency. And although the Māori economy is dwarfed by the North American indigenous economy, Māori have had to work consistently for the past two decades out of

pure necessity to build greater self-reliance, development and economic integration on their own terms. Today, not only is the Māori economy more profitable than the national economy, but it has a higher savings rate, both of which contribute to an implicit underlying growth that Helin illustrates is exceeding the rest of New Zealand. As such Māori have the knowledge and experience to help other communities to be a lot quicker and smarter in working the system.

The good news is that indigenous peoples in North America are in the best position ever to build their economies and take advantage of their very substantial resource base. With over 600,000 square kilometres of land and some US\$20 billion yet to be paid in treaty settlements, they will soon have access to tremendous wealth. In order to utilize these assets as well as the US\$18 billion in annual transfer payments, the only thing First Nations have to lose is "the dependency mindset, the colonial grip of a patronising bureaucracy, and the plague of social and political pathologies," says Helin. "This is the major challenge facing Indian country today. It also is the key to solving the seemingly intractable problem of reservation poverty. Tribal leaders must use the power they have to build viable nations before the opportunity slips away."

