



Native author urges less government dependency

Calvin Helin promotes entrepreneurial vision

by Lindsay Kelly, September 26, 2007

M'CHIGEENG-With a message of inspiration, hope and self-empowerment, internationally renowned author Calvin Helin spoke to a packed M'Chigeeng Arena on Friday afternoon, earning him a host of new fans and opening up a new dialogue about how First Nations can become self-sufficient and stop relying on government support.

It's a concept the British Columbia lawyer explores in his new book, 'Dances With Dependency,' published in the spring to glowing accolades and support from both Native and non-Native communities.

Hailing from the Tsimshian Nation, Mr. Helin has helped create a number of business initiatives, including the National Board of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. He has received a Commemoration Medal for the 125th Anniversary of Confederation, given by the Governor General of Canada to persons who have made a significant contribution to their fellow citizens, their community, and to Canada.

In addition, Mr. Helin has been recognized as one of the top 40 Under 40 by the Business in Vancouver newspaper, one of the top 15 leaders under the age of 40 who will lead British Columbia into the next century by Equity magazine, and is listed in the "Who's Who of Professionals." He has recently led high profile Aboriginal trade missions to New Zealand and China.

He was invited to speak in M'Chigeeng by the United Chiefs and Councils of Manitoulin Tribal Council, and it was Mr. Helin's only speaking engagement in Northern Ontario.

Draped in his clan blanket-featuring a striking red and black killer whale that represents his mother's protector-the soft-spoken speaker began his presentation with an important thought: every Aboriginal person can make a difference in changing the lives of First Nations people for the better.

"I asked myself the same question I'll ask you: if you think you can make a difference in your lifetime to our people, if you think your opinion counts," he said. "I'm here to tell you your opinion counts for everything."

But before people can understand how that is possible, it is integral that they first understand where they came from and how Canadian Aboriginals became so entangled in a poor social pathology, Mr. Helin suggested.

For example, according to archaeological evidence, Aboriginals have been living in northern BC for 13,000 years, so why, he asked, did the population thrive so well for 9,700 years? The ancestors of today's population didn't wait for a welfare cheque for the government, nor did they wait for the government to tell them what to do, Mr. Helin argued.

"It's very important to realize where our ancestors came from and that a long, long, long part of our heritage is self-reliance," he said.

He offered up a recent United Nations study which found that, overall, Canada ranks seventh on a list of countries with the best conditions for human development, but that, when this is broken down to focus on Aboriginal populations, Canada comes in 48th place, "down with third-world countries." This, Mr. Helin said, is unacceptable.

"The welfare trap is harming, most harshly, our children and our women," he lamented. "The status quo is unacceptable. We're creating too much damage to our communities. We're creating too much damage to our children. If we continue doing this, we might as well walk the plank and literally throw our women and children to the sharks-that's what we're doing. We have to do something different."

Social conditions plaguing First Nation populations are only growing, he continued. Child welfare cases are increasing, cases of childhood diabetes are on the rise, and more Aboriginals-women especially-are ending up in jails, he argued.

Mr. Helin was also critical of First Nations governance systems. While he said he respects what local First Nations have done in their communities with governance systems, he believes there is a better way. "The government has saddled us with an 1800s style of government that most Aboriginal people feel disempowers them," he suggested.

Using the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) as an example, Mr. Helin said he does not feel that the AFN truly represents him, because representatives are voted for by chiefs, not by individuals. It's this kind of system that leaves First Nations people, especially youth, feeling like they don't have any power to make a change, he added.

People are resistant to change, which makes changing the status quo difficult, Mr. Helin added. He had trouble publishing his book-and in fact spent \$100,000 of his own

resources to self-publish-because publishers believed people wouldn't listen, that he would be "'beat up' because I was telling the truth."

But the only way to facilitate change is to begin talking respectfully, but openly, amongst Aboriginals, with other First Nations and with non-Native populations as well, "because we're going to solve this," he said. "You're going to solve this."

The reasons to solve the situation are multi-purpose and wide-ranging, but first and foremost, it needs to be solved for the future generations, Mr. Helin said. Aboriginal youth under the age of 14 make up the fastest growing population in Canada. Currently, 33 percent of the Aboriginal population is under 14, while the number of non-Aboriginals under 14 sits at 19 percent, he said.

He calls this the "demographic tsunami," because unemployed Aboriginals, combined with a retiring workforce, will create a huge deficit in terms of the lack of revenue being contributed to social programs.

In addition, the Aboriginal population continues to grow, with \$9 billion being given out in transfer payments and another \$9 billion to funding service programs last year. With the Metis population continuing to earn the same status as Indians and Inuit, those numbers may only increase, Mr. Helin argued.

"This isn't an Aboriginal problem," he said. "It's a Canadian problem."

But rather than looking at this as a crisis, he suggests it is an opportunity to lift up the First Nation population in Canada out of this slump and change things around. "If Canada wants to remain prosperous and competitive as a nation, Canada needs young Aboriginals in the workforce," Mr. Helin said.

The skills needed to return First Nations populations to prosperity are all evident in their history, he continued. The early First Nations people were skilled in economics, relying on natural resources and trade with other First Nations, working together to sustain the tribe.

They also had solid leadership, and in looking back at the speeches of great chiefs like Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Red Crow and Joseph, Mr. Helin said they all had one thing in common: they were "straight people" who provided good and clear leadership.

After European contact, things became more complex as Europeans interfered in the ways of First Nations people, disease killed off large populations of Aboriginals, and government interference caused irreparable damage to First Nations people, Mr. Helin said. He cited an example by an author who claimed that the RCMP killed off as many as 20,000 dogs used by the Inuit so that the Inuit would become reliant on welfare and the treaty system.

Unfortunately, this pattern has socialized many Aboriginals into the "dependency mindset," which is a huge barrier to moving beyond picking up a welfare cheque every month, Mr. Helin said. And it's created lateral violence as well, in its effect on the younger generation which also "expects somebody else to look after them."

"The moment you start thinking like that, you give someone else control over your life," he said. This results in a lot of unhappy people, which he believes accounts for the high suicide rates amongst youth.

One solution is to support and encourage young entrepreneurs who want to do well in business and become self-reliant.

First Nations also need strong leadership that doesn't answer to the Indian Act, which he calls a "totally absurd situation."

"I've heard leaders talk about self-government, but someone else is paying for it," Mr. Helin said. "Is it really self-government if someone else is paying for it? It's like living in your mother's basement and asking for allowance every week."

Mr. Helin suggested that, unfortunately, a lack of education amongst leadership in some First Nations leads to corruption, and First Nations need to be more accountable to their members. One First Nation in Nova Scotia became ISO certified-a set of international business standards-and posts its financial records online so that they are responsible, accessible and transparent to all band members, he offered.

But the first thing communities need to do to move on is admit where they're at, "because if you pretend you're somewhere else, you might as well not even start," Mr. Helin suggested.

"In emphasizing what makes us different, we forget that, not long ago, we got out of the primordial soup-we're not that different," he said. "We have to take ownership of the problems. If we're always blaming somebody else, we'll never take responsibility for ourselves. We have to be responsible for our situation."

"We have to be healthy, work together and trust one another, just like our tribes did from antiquity," he added.

Rather than rely on financial payouts, Mr. Helin believes that communities need to look at long-term sustainability that comes with a strategic plan. Communities also must be able to vote for their leaders, and be able to trust in them to do what's best for the community.

He believes leaders need to have an informed vision about where the community wants to go in the future, and that people should consider the significance of education, which Mr. Helin describes as "one of the most important investments."

"If you don't have a strategy or objective of where you're going, you become the objective of someone who does," Mr. Helin reasoned. "And unfortunately, our vision has been provided by the Department of Indian Affairs."

Change can happen quickly and people can take control of their futures, he added. This can happen at a national level, but the easiest way to start making changes is at the local level by electing good leadership, becoming educated, working together and trusting each other.

"What tradition and what culture is there in picking up a welfare cheque?" Mr. Helin asked. "We want to feel good about ourselves and go on to do something useful-that's all it boils down to."

A portion of proceeds from sales of Mr. Helin's book will go into scholarships to help impoverished children in Vancouver, as well as karate programs for children. For more information on Mr. Helin's book, visit www.orcabooks.ca