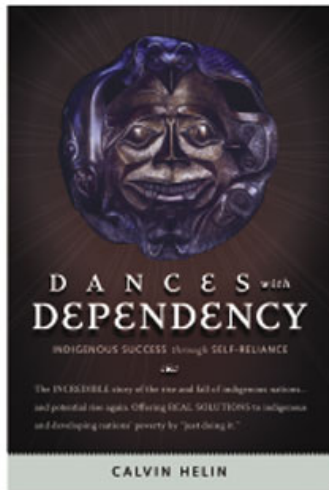


## Just doing it: Reforming aboriginal governance (February 2008 Issue)

By: Heather Ramsay



Wai Wah—“Just do it”—goes the old Tsimshian saying, and Calvin Helin, author of *Dances with Dependency: Indigenous Success Through Self Reliance*, can’t believe how far the expression has taken him over the last year.

The 48-year-old lawyer and businessman, originally from Lax Kw’alaams (Port Simpson) on BC’s north coast, woke up one morning and realized it was time to heed the words of his grandmother, a powerful Tsimshian matriarch from a noble hereditary line. When he was still a child, Maude Helin challenged her grandson to get an education

and fight for the rights of Indians when he grew up. As a founding member of the Native Brotherhood of BC, an advocacy group for working aboriginal people, she wanted to encourage her grandson to do something to make the lives of ordinary indigenous people better, too. Thirty years later, Helin admits that he got distracted along the way. As a consummate entrepreneur, Helin was caught up for a time in the pursuit of money for its own sake, but now that he is attempting to honour his grandmother’s wishes he’s watching his efforts mushroom. “The book is going crazy,” he says. Unable to find a publisher, Helin had to borrow \$100,000 to print the first batch in November 2006, but he says that in less than a year he’s sold 11,000 copies and he’s made back his money, and more.

That his self-published effort has been so successful echoes the key message of his book: self-sufficiency is essential for aboriginal people. And the way to move forward, he says, is through education, economic development, and government reform.

Helin is especially passionate about aboriginal communities freeing themselves from what he calls, “the welfare trap.” He argues that reliance on federal handouts offered through the Indian Act have hindered the development of a Native economy. He says First Nations must create their

own wealth, through business development and entrepreneurship at home.

“Land, and jurisdiction over land, is important,” he says “But we have to have some kind of leadership. We’ve been socialized into a system where the entire solution is to ask for more federal money.”

### **Cutting the apron strings**

Helin says an aboriginal entrepreneurial class is essential, if for nothing else than a way to pay for self-governance that elected band officials often only pay lip service to. If the band remains on the government payroll, it’s no different than continuing to live in your mother’s basement. “Self government means you generate your own revenue,” he says.

He says the federal and provincial governments currently throw \$18 billion at “the Indian Problem,” with few measurable successes and ever-increasing rates for social issues in aboriginal communities, including childhood poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and suicide. He doesn’t think the funding is worthwhile or sustainable as aboriginal populations grow at seven times the rate of the rest of society.

For Helin, who first attended what he calls “an atrociously run federal Indian day school,” and then was offered the opportunity to be boarded with the family of his Grade 8 teacher and attend school in the Lower Mainland, getting a quality education is of utmost importance too. Attracting a lot of attention, Calvin Helin’s book has been reviewed in newspapers across the country. He’s also been invited to speak to school administrators (including the BC School Superintendents Association and the Bulkley Valley School District), credit union leaders, and more.

Helin calls for radical changes to the status quo. No one in what he calls the “Indian industry”—the cadre of lawyers, consultants and bureaucrats who feed off the Indian Act and the reserve system—is safe from his ire. But he saves some of his strongest criticisms for the elected leaders of the nations’ band councils themselves.

Electing band councils may look democratic, he says, but band councils are not answerable to the electorate. They report to the Department of Indian Affairs, and community members who have a beef with the band council have no recourse. Helin points to instances where band members who questioned the status quo have been kicked off the reserve thanks to band council resolutions.

Except for a few examples, like the economic innovations introduced into the Osoyoos First Nations by Chief Clarence Louie, aboriginal leaders are not putting forward solutions, but still seeking someone to blame, he continues.

Helin was warned his approach—he describes it as “pulling the shower curtain back on the naked Indian”—would be unpopular, but he says the opposite is true. “Every political party in Canada has asked me to run.”

### **Another voice**

Satsan, also known as Herb George, is a Wet'suwet'en hereditary chief and the president of the National Centre for First Nations Governance (NCFNG), an independent non-profit focused on research and support for new governance models. Although he hasn't read Helin's book, he has no kind words for the 130-year-old Indian Act or the institutions that have sprung from it either. He says the chronology of what brought aboriginal people to the compromised position they are in today is no secret. "Our people didn't wake up one day and decide to be this way."

A way of life was systematically imposed on aboriginal people, with the express purpose of oppressing them. Land was taken, ancient traditions like the potlatch outlawed, efforts at commercial fishing and agriculture thwarted, and all for the purpose of ensuring the European settlers cascading onto Indian territories had less competition from the original inhabitants. "Frustration with the Indian Act is common right across the country," he says. "The real question is: what do you do about it?"

"What is the society we want?" he asks. "Is it a return to traditional systems? Can our traditional systems accommodate the changes that have occurred in aboriginal societies? Do we need to change those systems to reflect life in the 21st century, or build something entirely new?"

"We were split into separate parts," he says, referring to the reserve system dating back to 1876 when the Indian Act was first introduced. Tribal bodies like the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en were divided into several small reserves, often with no acknowledgement of traditional governance systems. Although hereditary chiefs once again have a place in decision-making in many communities, the Indian Act still favours elected band councils.

But the Indian Act can't continue to stand in the way of aboriginal people taking more control over their governance structures and their lives. He says court case after court case, since the seminal Calder case in 1973, has proven aboriginal people retain title to their land and thereby their inherent right to make decisions about that land.

"The rights we had before colonization continue to exist," he says. "Now, how do we organize ourselves?" The NCFNG is trying to help in that regard, working with communities across the country on governance assessments and tool kits to help engage the citizenship in discussion of how their communities could run.

### **Beyond the tipping point**

Helin describes his book as a tipping point, a possible beginning to a social epidemic. He says most of the interest in the book has come from aboriginal community members themselves, those very people who have been disempowered by the Indian Act and the band councils.

Satsan says that is exactly where dialogue has to happen: in the community. Answering the question of what we want requires people to be able to come together and talk together in a respectful way, he says. Helin speaks of dialogue and respect too.

On his website Helin has reprinted the words of former Prime Minister Paul Martin: "What is important is not whether you agree with every point Calvin Helin makes, but that he is raising issues which must be discussed if progress is to be achieved. Indeed, the fact that this book has aroused such interest is a positive sign for the future."

Wai Wah!