

The Epoch Times

Canada's Martin Holds on to Kelowna Dream

Former Canadian prime minister tells *The Epoch Times* why he hasn't given up on accord, two years on

By Sharda Vaidyanath

Apr 17, 2008

Epoch Times Parliament Hill Reporter

OTTAWA—Two-and-a-half years after spearheading the Kelowna Accord as prime minister, Paul Martin is again pushing to improve the quality of life of Canada's aboriginals. This time as a backbench MP with a private member's bill, which is now before Senate.

Under Martin's leadership as prime minister, a groundbreaking 18-month process seeking to improve the lot of Canada's aboriginal community culminated in the First Minister's Meeting in Kelowna in November 2005.

Canada has faced criticism in international forums over the tremendous disparity in quality of life between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.

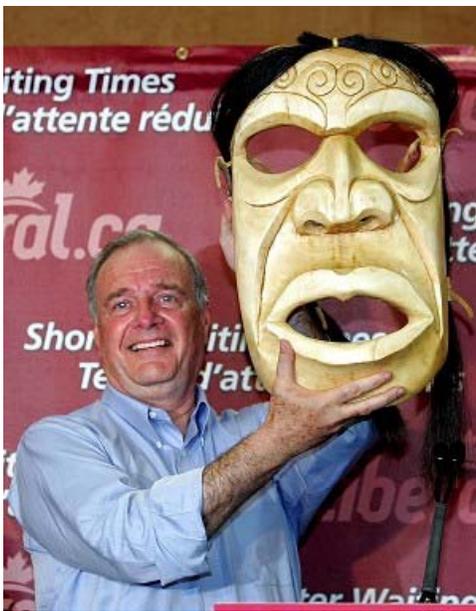
The United Nations has noted that Canada's aboriginals have significantly lower life expectancies, higher occurrence rates of diseases like Tuberculosis, substance abuse problems and high rates of imprisonment. A majority of Canada's aboriginal children were living in poverty in 2005, and some 20 per cent of aboriginals lacked adequate water and sanitation systems.

Because the Kelowna Accord initiative brought all parties to the table, it was seen as a step forward by many aboriginal leaders. But what became known as the Kelowna Accord was never implemented because that same month the Liberals were ousted in a non-confidence vote.

However, Martin continues to believe that the accord was "the single most comprehensive approach" to closing the gap between the quality of life most Canadians enjoy with the poverty-stricken existence of many aboriginals.



"The Kelowna Accord is the single most comprehensive approach to the issues of health care, education, housing, clean water and economic opportunity that we have ever seen in Canada."



Paul Martin holds up a native Makiseet mask carving on a 2004 campaign stop in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. (Carlo Allegri/Getty Images)

To that end Bill C-292, Martin's private member's bill which calls on the Conservatives to implement the accord, is now before the Senate. It seeks to provide education, housing, health, drinking water, and economic development over a ten-year time frame with a cost of \$5.1 billion.

Martin told *The Epoch Times* in an interview that the collaborative effort it took to put the agreement together was unprecedented.

"If you look at the history of this country, that kind of cooperative effort has not been undertaken. It has simply been the federal government imposing upon the aboriginal people to

the exclusion of the provinces and territories of the federal government solutions. And that clearly has not

worked."

The accord involved negotiations between the provinces, territories and five major aboriginal groups. When testifying before the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples earlier this week, Martin said that "neither the aboriginal leadership nor the provinces and territories have turned their backs on its objectives and targets."

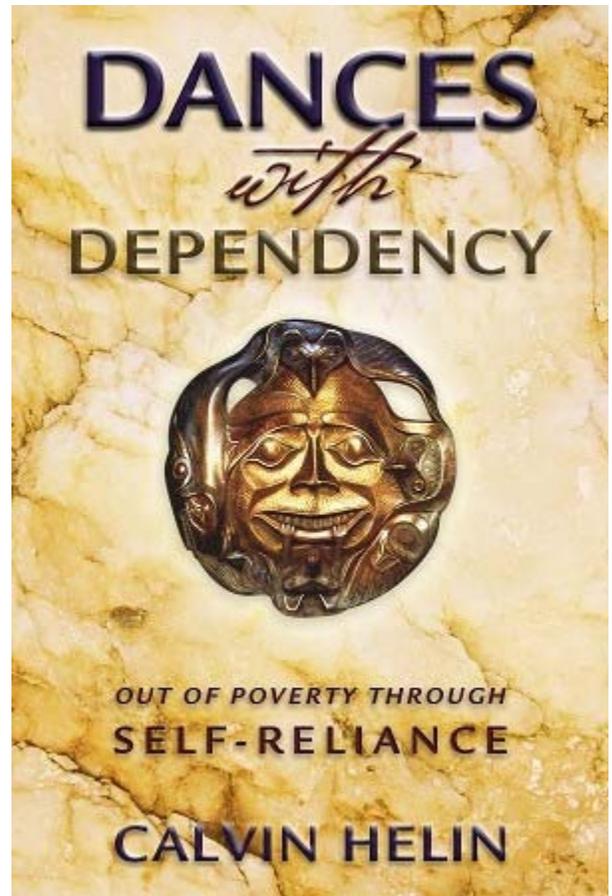
Even if Martin's bill passes, a private member's bill has no financial backing from the government. Chuck Strahl, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, says the Kelowna Accord "has no money attached to it. That was always the weakness of it."

Strahl says that when it comes to First nations issues in Canada, "the road to hell has been paved with good intentions."

"Over the last 20 years, every single Speech from the Throne and every single budget speech announces how we are about to turn the corner for First Nations and things are going to be different . . . Everyone talks a good line but when it comes right down to it, things aren't actually better."

Chief Patrick Brazeau of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) said a concern he has with the accord is that the native groups involved are not representative of all the aboriginal peoples of Canada .

Brazeau wasn't satisfied with accountability and transparency structures in the accord and thus did not support it. CAP represents the national voice of off-reserve Aboriginal Peoples, estimated to be 80 per cent of the aboriginal population.



Dust cover of *Dances With Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-reliance*. Author Calvin Helin says government policy over the past several generations has resulted in socializing aboriginal people into thinking that government is going to take care of their problems. (Courtesy of Calvin Helin)

Calvin Helin, an aboriginal lawyer from British Columbia and author of *Dances with Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-reliance*, acknowledges Martin's good intentions.

But if changes are ever to come about, he believes an attitudinal shift is required of mainstream Canadians and aboriginal peoples alike.

It's time to scrap the status quo in government aboriginal relations spanning over two hundred years, says Helin, citing the long-term costs of wholesale transfers of cash with little accountability or transparency.

"What's happened with government policy over the past several generations is that it socialized aboriginal people into thinking that government is going to take care of their problem," he says.

In his book, Helin offers a solution to a complex web of political and social pathologies afflicting the gamut of aboriginal people to the degree that "they no longer know themselves or their enemies."

"Aboriginal citizens must take ownership of these problems and assert control over their destinies. We must look immediately to opportunities to generate our own sources of wealth and employment that could lead to the Holy Grail of re-discovered independence and self-reliance."

It should be remembered, says Helin, that for an estimated 9,600 years, the rich cultural and spiritual systems of this land's indigenous peoples thrived "without a cent from government."

Martin says after 200 years of attempts at assimilation and successive governments' refusal to listen, the time has come to "work with them."

"We sat down with aboriginal leadership who said we want to respond to our people, that we need tools, we need instruments and what Kelowna said was, 'Good, we will provide you with those instruments so you can respond to your people.'"

However, Helin believes that systemic problems also need to be addressed in the way the government relates to the aboriginal community.

"Everybody thinks we have a democratic system under the Indian Act; it looks democratic but it's not," says Helin.

For example, chiefs are accountable to the department of Indian and Northern Affairs, not to their communities, and the Assembly of First Nations, the national organization representing Aboriginal Peoples, is exempt from the Federal Accountability Act.

Hard-working tax payers are justified in asking for accountability and transparency for Aboriginal communities because they are not getting it right now," says Helin.

Martin maintains that Kelowna provides the "huge increase in accountability and good governance" that aboriginal leaders want.

"The aboriginal leadership in this country wants to have good governance and they want to have accountability. And so one of things that happened in Kelowna is that we set aside the money and enabled the aboriginal leadership to develop a capability in all of the bands so that they could provide that good governance."

Last November, the Conservatives brought in the Specific Claims Tribunal Act, something First Nations had been requesting for three decades, says Strahl.

The act created an independent tribunal to ensure fairness in the way specific claims are handled and to speed up the resolution of land claims. "We actually co-wrote the legislation with the Assembly of First Nations," says Strahl, "so we got it as good as it gets. The Kelowna Accord had nothing in it about specific claims yet there is \$2.5 billion just for specific claims covered under this Act."

Strahl adds that new federal-provincial arrangements regarding First Nations education will be announced in the coming weeks.