

Native writer: "Just do it"

> BY ROB McMAHON

The time has come to *wai wai*. A Tsimshian expression meaning "just do it", it took Vancouver lawyer and Native business leader Calvin Helin 30 years to articulate. When placed in the context of aboriginal issues, especially given Canada's colonial legacy, it takes on further significance.

Helin's new book, *Dances With Dependency* (Orca Spirit Publishing, \$34.95)—to be launched on Saturday (December 2) at 6:30 p.m. at UBC's Museum of Anthropology—illustrates this statement by outlining the history of systemic oppression of Canada's Native people.

The book, from which partial proceeds will go to a youth martial-arts school, promotes a business-oriented solution for aboriginal communities. In response to criticisms that economic integration will result in a loss of culture, Helin said the lack of an economy is just as dangerous.

"What culture is there in picking up a welfare cheque?" he asked during an interview at his Richmond office. "Are Japanese, because they have an economy, less Japanese? The answer is straightforward: it shouldn't be an issue."

No stranger to personal success, Helin, a member of the Lax Kw'alaams community of northern B.C.'s Tsimshian Nation, has made the "Top 40 under 40" list in both *Business in Vancouver* and the *Financial Post*. A practising lawyer, Helin is also on the executive of several provincial and national Native business associations.

Helin said he aims to use lessons from this personal success to help lift his people out of what he calls the "culture of expectancy". He argues that this entrenched reliance on externally provided programs—from housing to social assistance—has blocked the development of an independent Native economy.

"The system is chewing up kids and women, and also men," he said. "Everyone knows the problems, but there are no answers. I've tried to paint a picture of what the situation is and how we can move forward."

The time for reform is ripe due to two colliding trends: the aging of Canada's population and the growing Native population. If the status quo remains when this "demographic tsunami" hits from 2011 onward, these two groups threaten to put a strain on the Canadian economy it won't be able to sustain.

The book's overall goal is nothing less than a paradigm shift. Its subtitle, *Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance*, neatly summarizes this conviction. Beginning with a history of precontact Native communities, Helin outlines how these groups developed sophisticated economies, cultures, and sociopolitical structures long before Europeans arrived in North America. (For more information on



Lawyer Calvin Helin is calling on aboriginal people to end the "culture of expectancy" and achieve self-reliance through economic development.

the book, visit www.spiritorca.com/)

"The answers to our present and our future lie in our past," Helin said. "We created beautiful arts, language, and culture, and had a vibrant economy. How did this come about? Not from laying on the couch, eating potato chips and cashing welfare cheques."

Given Helin's views on the government's role in creating current problems, he doesn't have kind words for the state—or the band councils created by and accountable to the federal government. He said that Native communities need to take ownership of their problems from an industry of entrenched interests that wants to keep the system in place. Helin acknowledged that parts of the book, which he hopes will become a catalyst for dialogue, may make readers uneasy.

"In the book, I've pulled back the shower curtain to show the naked problems," he said. "Some of what I've talked about will make some people feel uncomfortable."

He stressed that the issues are not an "aboriginal" problem—rather, they are the result of a history of systemic violence that can apply to any group, regardless of ethnic background. Helin's analysis applies to other marginalized groups around the world, from North American inner-city communities to indigenous groups in developing nations.

"At the end of the day, it's not an aboriginal problem, or even a Canadian problem—it's a world problem," Helin said.

For example, one of the book's case studies examines New Zealand's Maori people. The Maori are different from Canada's Native communities in several ways but share many of the same problems. However, they are further ahead in

terms of developing their economy.

Helin's Maori friend and colleague Te Taru White is in Vancouver to make a presentation at the book launch. He told the *Straight* that the two communities share a need to move forward from grievance to self-reliance.

White, a *Kaihautu* (Maori leader) at the Museum of New Zealand, used the analogy of a Maori cultural practice to describe this progression. For five days after someone dies, the community grieves for that person and confronts their loss. In the context of the community's recovery from historical trauma, White said, most Maori are in day two of the grieving stage, but some are ready early and are moving forward.

For the Maori, the movement forward has taken the form of working within the mainstream economic system. As a result of this shift toward economic development, the Maori have had enormous financial success, reaching a commercial asset base of nearly \$9 billion in 2001. There is now a Maori university in New Zealand, and many Maori youth learn science, math, and other subjects in their own language.

Education is a requirement of moving forward, as is the reform of political systems and social programs, Helin said. These are important long-term goals essential for achieving true self-reliance. However, he said he believes that the best short-term focus for Native communities is to focus on economic development.

With huge resource development occurring across Canada, especially in the North and the West, Helin said, Native groups are well-positioned to participate and use that capital to move their people forward. ♦