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NEWS

Dancing Away from Dependency

Aboriginal author Calvin Helin discusses the need for economic self-reliance for First Nations

By [Amy German](#)

While James Bay Cree Day at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics was a day of celebration and cultural sharing, it was not without its serious moments.

While the performances rang out from the stage of the Aboriginal Pavilion, in its adjacent reception hall the Crees held a private lunch after taking in the first show with a guest speaker.

That speaker was Calvin Helin, a Vancouver lawyer and author of *Dances with Dependency: Indigenous Success through Self-Reliance*.

In an interview with the Nation, Helin spoke about why he wrote the book and Canada's legacy of keeping its Aboriginal people dependent on the system.

"I wrote *Dances with Dependency* because as a kid, growing up in a remote community, I couldn't figure out why Aboriginal people were going through so much misery and why we as a group were destined to have so many problems.

"In order to understand it, I had to paint this picture, in which we were purposely put into a situation of economic dependency as a means of controlling us. This current Indian Act or welfare trap system is killing our population and we have to do something about it," said Helin.

To remedy this situation, Helin, who is a member of the Tsimshian First Nation from the northern B.C. community of Lax Kw'alaams, proposed that understanding is the first key. Though Aboriginal people have subsisted in North America for thousands of years, it is only in the past 300-400 years that they have had so many problems. How life was prior to colonization is important to recognize. The Aboriginal peoples were once self-reliant and without taking ownership of the current problem it will never be solved.

In terms of beating the system, according to Helin, Aboriginal communities need to start generating their own revenue as a means of overcoming this dependency – much like the Cree of Eeyou Istchee have done.

“If you look at the system that was set up under the Indian Act, 100% of the wealth in our communities comes from the federal government. It has created a situation of complete dependence. The number 1 rule of dependency is the more dependent you are, the less control you have over your life,” said Helin.

The Cree were not the only Aboriginal Nation that Helin pointed too when it came to taking steps to break the cycle. The Maori in New Zealand have also made innovative steps, investing their treaty monies into education.

According to Helin, educating First Nation peoples so that they can successfully participate in the job market is quintessential to the future. To solidify his argument, Helin referred to a study released by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards in Ottawa that discusses the value of educating Aboriginal people to the Canadian economy. With one third of Canada’s population getting set to retire, the study states that by 2026, Aboriginals – with higher education and pay equity – could contribute \$400 billion to Canada’s GDP.