

MURPHY'S VIEW

Native leader shows way to chart a course out of the welfare trap

It's a joke only an aboriginal could tell, about the Minister of Indian Affairs slipping on the stairs and landing on his backside: "You know what happened when he landed? He broke the noses of seven Indian chiefs."

And it's one of the nuggets contained in an important new book by aboriginal blue-blood Calvin Helin, a lawyer and businessman who hails from the northern village of Port Simpson but now lives in suburban Richmond.

As Helin points out, aboriginal Canadians have a great sense of humour. They clearly need it, given the type of government dished out to them by dictatorial chiefs, band councils and the Indian Affairs bureaucracy.

The reasons for this are largely economic. "Typically, 100 per cent of the wealth flowing into aboriginal communities comes in the form of transfer payments from the federal government," says



Jon Ferry

OPINION

Helin in *Dances with Dependency* (\$34.95, Orca Spirit Publishing).

This suffocating welfare system has created a crippling sense of dependency among those who, for thousand of years before the Europeans arrived, relied on nature and each other for their survival.

Helin, 47, thinks it's time they got their self-reliance back — by using their vast lands and mushrooming young population to turn themselves into a veritable economic powerhouse.

Vast lands? According to

Helin, aboriginal people currently own more than 600,000 square kilometres of land — and may eventually own or control one-third of the entire Canadian land mass.

They just have to develop their own system of wealth creation, as they used to do in days of old. "Without self-generated revenue, all the political talk about self-government is just talk," he says.

Did I say this was an important book? Yes. And that's because, while not glossing over the gloom, it offers a refreshing message of hope — and strong call to action.

Indeed, Helin says it was his own Tsimshian people who coined the phrase "Wai Wah," or "just do it," thousands of years before Nike.

Before reading Helin's book, I was puzzled why Premier Gordon Campbell had got so gung-ho of late about native issues. Cynically, I put it down to the usual, tired politics of political correctness.

But now I think I get it: Helping native people help themselves is one area where Campbell, who has a lot of the missionary in him, feels he can leave a real legacy.

Also, the current western Canadian commodities boom provides the perfect business opportunity for the fast-growing number of aboriginal entrepreneurs who are weary of the welfare trap.

Of course, there are those living off the old, left-leaning, Indian-misery industry who argue that natives get "corrupted" when they become involved in business.

But that kind of thinking is patronizing and misguided. As H.L. Mencken said: "Economic independence is the foundation of the only sort of freedom worth a damn."

Besides, given how shabbily they've been treated in recent history, our aboriginal people really shouldn't have to kiss anybody's ass.

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