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midweek edition



Sullivan faces his final months page 9

West 36 pages



photo Jason Lang

The prophet of self-reliance

by Michael McCarthy
contributing writer

Calvin Helin stops his car at the bottom of Dunbar Street on his way to the Musqueam Indian Band reserve in Southlands. There, on the street of one of the most prosperous parts of town far removed from the Downtown Eastside, sits a young First Nations man panhandling for spare change. Helin talks briefly to the man before shaking his head and leaving. Even in wealthy Dunbar, Helin finds proof of a severe dependency he claims destroys everyone it touches. It's a crisis the lawyer, aboriginal rights activist and author is dedicating his career towards stopping.

"I had lunch with [former prime minister] Paul Martin recently," says Helin, driving slowly through the Musqueam reserve, pointing out the fancy new houses of some band members that stand in sharp

contrast to the squalid appearance of others. "He asked me to get involved with one of his aboriginal projects. I said 'no.' I think I've been approached to run for office by every political party in the country since my book came out. I told them all the same thing. I think I can make the world a better place by working in ways other than politics."

Helin is author of *Dances With Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance*, already a best seller in Canada and poised to enter the international market. Against advice, Helin took out a loan on his house to print an initial 11,000 copies. The book has since sold 15,000 copies with little publicity and has been updated for the U.S. market. Helin is set to go on a publicity tour soon.

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Aboriginal business leader Calvin Helin wants to rescue First Nations people from the 'welfare trap' by urging them to find independence through the private sector

WHEN CAPRI ATTACKS • GAY TOURISM • SUMMER DRINKS

Helin says aboriginal communities must generate wealth to solve problems

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His Los Angeles public relations firm is scheduling appearances on major media outlets like the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Helin has already appeared on talk radio shows in the U.S.. In Canada, he's mainly known to First Nations people and those concerned about aboriginal issues, but after his next book his relative anonymity is likely to change.

In his book, Helin argues the Canadian government spends \$18 billion a year on services for aboriginal people and transfers to reserves, so if money alone were capable of fixing problems there would have been major successes by now. He says that simply throwing more money at the problem will not make it go away. In fact, it will likely make things worse.

"The current system is just completely not sustainable," says Helin. "You've got \$18 billion going to 650,000 Indians and Inuits. Then there's 300,000 to 800,000 Métis who are winning aboriginal rights cases at the Supreme Court, and they all want the same government support. So we talking \$36 billion dollars a year at a time when a third of the Canadian population is heading towards retirement? Who the heck is going to pay for all this?"

Helin believes the only hope for aboriginal communities in the future is to create their own wealth, with the private sector as the most efficient way to create that wealth. He says it's time for indigenous people to stop dwelling on the injustices of the past and decide how they can influence the future.

CONDEMNING the status quo might sound racist if coming from non-aboriginal, right-wing politicians, but Helin is anything but a reactionary. An aboriginal business leader who hails from a "very poor" family of ancestral Tsimshian chiefs in Port Simpson, near Prince Rupert, Helin was a non-status Indian who was ineligible for any government funding and moved to Vancouver to go to high school. His Grade 8 teacher was so impressed with the young man's attitude he took the boy under his wing. Helin went on to earn a law degree from UBC in 1992 and has become a keynote speaker on topics relating to native



Calvin Helin, author of *Dances With Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance*, wants aboriginal communities to break their cycle of government dependence.

photo Jason Lang

business and legal issues. A former member of Ferguson and Gifford law firm, he struck out on his own seven years ago into corporate commercial law, specializing in business law.

Since then Helin has led international, multi-million-dollar economic development projects throughout the world, is found-

ing president of the Native Investment and Trade Association, a former vice-president of the National Aboriginal Business Association, and a former director of the Vancouver Board of Trade. He was chosen one of the top "40 Under 40" entrepreneurs by Business in Vancouver, and was awarded as a "super achiever in business, the professions,

academia and public service" by the Financial Post. And now he's become an author and activist.

Helin, 48, lives in a lovely 5,000-square-foot home near Quilchena Golf Course ("I'm a lousy golfer") in Richmond with his wife Vernita, daughters Georgina and Denise, son Lewis, and grandson Lucius.

"I'm well off, but I no longer chase money," he says with a laugh. "My father lectured me once about that. He said that if I 'did the right thing,' then success would come to me. He was right. To me, doing the right thing means helping other poor people get out of the situation they are in."

Helin pulls up his sparkling new Cadillac SRX car at the house of friend Gail Sparrow, a former chief of the Musqueam band. Her house is immaculate, surrounded by a white picket fence, one of the well-kept houses on the reserve. A lush green lawn blooms in the summer heat. Helin keeps a trailer in the back, which functions as an office for his Eagle Group Company, which markets environmental products and now his books and audiotapes.

"I think it is really a case of either you change things now or you can pay later," says Helin, settling into a chair in Sparrow's living room.

Normally well-dressed, today Helin sports a colourful Hawaiian shirt with dress pants and loafers. "If not, you are going to be paying for all of the social pathologies that afflict aboriginal people, from diabetes to child welfare to heart disease. We make up 3.5 per cent of the national population, but we make up 30 per cent of the children in child welfare. In B.C. it's over 50 percent. You can throw \$100 billion dollars at the problem and you would get an even more massive welfare trap."

A lot of aboriginal people think they are owed something because of all of the bad things that have happened to them, he says. Buying into that argument is admitting it's OK to sell your dignity and control over your life for a few welfare crumbs. "I've experienced racism all my life. To my mind, that's a problem for the person who is racist. I pay it no attention at all."

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Critics charge Helin with perpetuating negative aboriginal stereotypes

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“For thousands of years we weren’t reliant on any government,” says Sparrow, age 56. “I remember growing up as a child here and nobody was on welfare. We all expected to work, and we did. It was only in the ‘60s that welfare was offered, and some people took that option.”

In June the administration office on the Musqueam reserve was closed for a month in protest over distribution of millions of dollars in band funds. Over 300 band members such as Sparrow raised concerns about housing problems, the lack of band support for drug and alcohol treatment programs, and a childcare facility. They raised questions about the accountability of the band council, transparency of band business and the distribution of millions of dollars in funding.

Sparrow, who leads a group called the Musqueam Membership Movement, says she hopes the protest will lead to council members being held to what she argues should be greater accountability and council business being more transparent. “They have been put on notice. If they don’t pay attention, we will occupy the office again or we will go straight to the minister’s office. Right now, the only accounting we see is an annual audit written in such a way that nobody except a certified accountant can understand it.”

Sparrow says the Indian Act needs to be abolished. “Most of it is archaic and obsolete, and it provides no opportunity of involvement by the people affected by it.”

In an article in the *Globe and Mail* Mus-

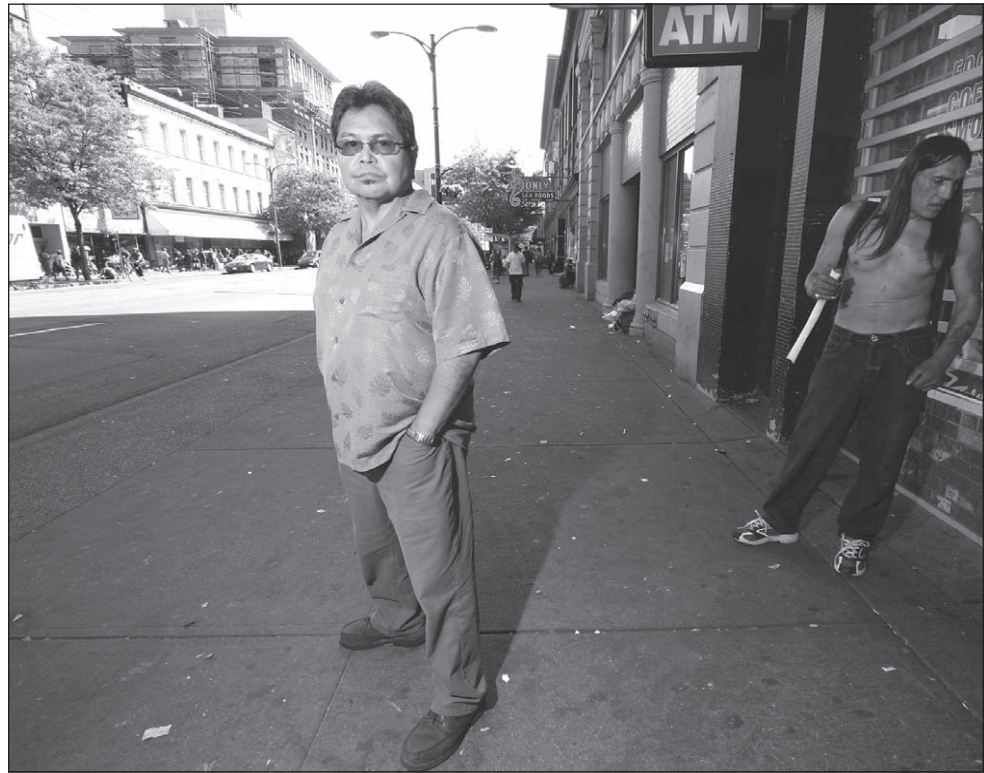
queam Chief Ernie Campbell doubted the protest would lead to changes on the reserve. “It did not have any impact on anything, as far as council is concerned. We’ve been through worse than this. It was a minor thing.”

Campbell did not reply to the *Courier’s* request for comment.

The governance structure for aboriginal groups in Canada, says Helin, leaves the average band member powerless. All of the wealth from transfer payments, or welfare from the government, is controlled by the Chief in Council. The “gatekeepers to the cash,” as he terms them, are elected by community members but they are not answerable to their constituents because the Indian Act says chiefs are only answerable to the Minister of Indian Affairs. In effect, band members have no idea where the money is going.

“Confucius said, ‘If there is rot at the top, there is going to be rot at the bottom.’ We will never be able to move forward with corruption in our leadership unless we clean this up,” says Helin. “A step in the right direction would be to introduce accountability and transparency in all the funding.”

THE IDEA that aboriginal people can succeed through self-reliance and in business is hardly a new concept, but certainly one threatening to certain people, including many aboriginal people who have contempt for “white” Canadian society and oppose any union with it. A review of *Dances With Dependency* on Amazon reveals a typically harsh



First Nations leader Jerry Adams agrees with Helin on many issues, but says significant healing is required among aboriginal people for them to move forward. *photo Jason Lang*

comment in the readers’ reviews section. While Helin’s book is a scathing indictment of the welfare trap for aboriginal people, it “also leans heavily toward Friedmanite economics and indigenous self-hatred,” writes a reviewer signed in as J. Bird. “For Helin,

First Nations bands must support present mainstream neo-liberal economics in order to get out of this ‘welfare trap’ because this is how the rest of the world runs an efficient economy.”

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Entitlement programs create dependency: Helin

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The review claims Helin's book is "neo-assimilation" and engages the mainstream perspective that all Indians are fat, lazy, stupid, and on welfare. Helin, it concludes, should be ashamed to call himself an aboriginal person because he obviously hates that part of himself.

Helin's response to such reviews is delivered in a typically calm voice. "If I understand this position correctly the Maoris, the Choctaws, Alaskan Native Americans, the Osoyoos and Member-tou First Nations are all wrong in engaging in the mainstream economy to make a better future for their children? All the available statistics indicate the current system is literally killing aboriginal children and women. Fancy ideological labels like neo-assimilation do little to make a difference to people that are suffering."

Helin advocates economic integration—not assimilation—as a way for indigenous people to gain greater control of their lives. As long as someone is controlling your purse strings they control you. He notes that aboriginal communities in B.C. have major assets with commodities and natural resources, and argues aboriginal people must embark on joint ventures to develop them. "First we need to complete the treaty process. The treaty in Tsawassen may prove to be a good one. The leaders there have the experience, education and training to move forward. That may not be possible yet in other locations."

Aboriginal people are reluctant to speak publicly about such things as dependency and economic development for fear of providing ammunition to the political right, much of which they see as racist, says Helin. Non-aboriginal observers have also been reluctant to talk about aboriginal economic and social development because they also fear being labelled as racists. Even the many chiefs and councils running honest governments feel compelled to de-

pend against reported abuses because they fear their activities may become tarred with the same brush.

While several aboriginal organizers contacted for this story preferred not to comment, Vancouver First Nations leader Jerry Adams, recently with the Vancouver Police Board and a worker at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre, calls Helin's work "amazing."

"Calvin has really been pushing our buttons, which is really good. We are too passive, too accepting of our place in society. We need somebody like him, especially in politics."
—Jerry Adams, Vancouver First Nations leader

"I agree with most of what Calvin says, but there is a lot of pain and healing that needs to be done before we move forward," says Adams. "You can't just say 'do it.' Our people are still very needy, especially here in the metropolitan area. There have been successes in smaller places like Oliver and Westbank, but there's an infrastructure in place in a smaller community where people can talk to each other. Apologies by the federal government are a start, but they opened up a lot of wounds among our elders here in Vancouver. The pain just doesn't just stop and go away by itself."

However, Adams agrees with Helin that it's time for aboriginal people to move forward, especially with aboriginal youth. "Calvin has really been pushing our buttons, which is really good. We are too passive, too accepting of our place in society. We need some-

body like him, especially in politics. He's a great leader and speaker, and he needs to talk to the young folks and say it's time to stand up and get involved. If Calvin ran for office, I'm sure a lot of people would vote for him."

HELIN ARGUES in his book that welfare has its place in helping truly needy people. But he also believes that such programs "have created a dependency and entitlement mindset in a substantial portion of the population." That mindset, he says, impairs a feeling of self-worth.

The personal misery that this entitlement system is creating is compounded by the massive "demographic tsunami" that is coming to swamp the finances of North America, claims Helin. He says our economy cannot afford such an expensive and unproductive system at a time when a third of the labour force will retire.

"In order to have an impact, I need to hit the media relentlessly," Helin says, back in the car and heading for his Friday night soccer game. Three times a week he attends karate classes. He mentors many six- to 13-year-old inner-city children at Grandview elementary in martial arts. "I plan to sell a million copies of *Dances*, which will be the first in a series of unique and provocative books."

Helin is working on his next book, a self-help manual titled *Surviving Dependency: Empowerment through Self-Reliance*, which he says will show poor people—whether aboriginal or not—how to get out of their situation. In August Helin is off to Albuquerque, New Mexico for the largest aboriginal festival in North America, where he will promote his book. After that he heads to China for a trade mission.

"My long-term goal," he says, "is to help all disenfranchised people reach for their dreams with the best tools available, from education to venture capitalization."

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