

# Few spared in attack on aboriginal dependency

First nations lawyer criticizes governments and tribal leaders alike in a call for action to escape the welfare trap

## BOOK REVIEW

### DANCES WITH DEPENDENCY

Indigenous Success  
Through Self-Reliance

BY CALVIN HELIN

Orca Spirit Publishing and Communications, 313 pages  
(\$34.95)

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BY MAURICE BRIDGE  
VANCOUVER SUN

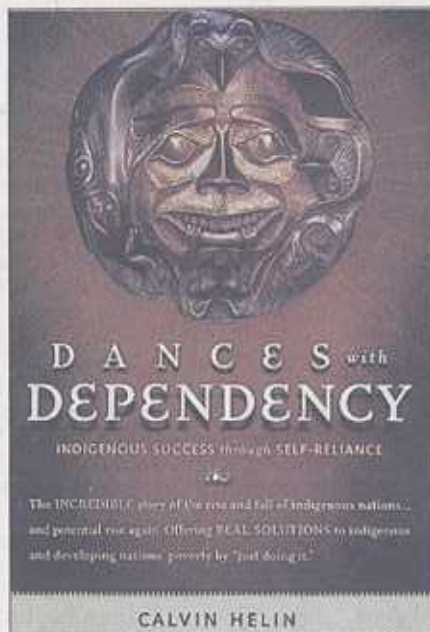
To Calvin Helin, the Canadian government's mismanagement of aboriginal affairs is a welfare trap that has enslaved much of the aboriginal population of this part of the planet, stripping it of pride, ambition and achievement.

The only solution, he argues, is to walk away from its soul-destroying grip and return to the self-sufficiency that marked first nations before they had contact with European colonizers, about 400 years ago.

This is not an opinion everyone shares, and Helin knows he is courting controversy, but he brings serious credentials to the discussion of a change he feels is long overdue.

Helin is a Vancouver lawyer, a member of the Lax Kw'alaams community of the Tsimshian nation on B.C.'s north-west coast.

He's also a martial-arts teacher and an unstoppable entrepreneur. Like any entrepreneur, he has the scars to prove



**Calvin Helin is unsparing in his criticism of aboriginal leaders who have failed to resist being 'managed.'**

it, noting that he received his "first PhD in business by going spectacularly broke" in the fishing business in the early 1980s, when interest rates hit 24 per cent.

He is also president of the Native Investment and Trade Association and vice-president of the National Aboriginal Business Association, but unlike many who head business organizations, he favours quiet advocacy over booster-

ism.

So the arrival of his first book, *Dances with Dependency: Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance*, is something of a surprise, not so much for its sentiments as for its roundhouse indictment of the destructive policies successive governments have used to "manage" the indigenous population and for its unsparing criticism of aboriginal leaders who have failed to resist them.

Helin wrote the book in a white heat last year after having a powerful, frightening dream in which a raven told him he had lost his way and should dedicate himself to finding solutions for aboriginal peoples. (The raven is the guardian spirit of the Gitsiis tribe of the Tsimshian nation, of which his respected late grandmother was chief.)

He launched his book in a moving early-December ceremony at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of B.C. The strength of spirit he seeks to rekindle was palpably present in the huge hall of ancient totem poles.

Slight and soft-spoken, Helin threw down the gauntlet to governments and first nations alike. "The real issue is what we are going to do about this as Canadians," he told his audience. "It's time for the real chiefs to stand up."

As much as he dissects hundreds of years of government policies, ranging from misguided to genocidal, he pours contempt on the aboriginal politicians who he says are "openly profiting from this sea of despair and poverty" and on non-aboriginal "hucksters and consultants" who are getting rich in "the Indi-

an industry."

He says he hopes his book will catalyze a conversation; it may just as easily start a fight.

Helin's training as a lawyer is apparent in his writing style, which often bristles with footnotes. But it is concise and presents a full, clear picture of the ruinous afflictions that have been visited on first nations. Anyone who doesn't know how we arrived at our current unhappy state will find the path clearly marked here.

He also describes the "demographic tsunami" of young aboriginals who are reaching working age, ready to fill the growing gap in the national workforce,

provided they can get the education and training they require.

But it's in the more personal passages that Helin's passion shines most brightly. He describes his impoverished childhood and speaks of an admired elementary-school teacher in east Vancouver.

Through it all, his writing is infused with an old expression from the coastal Tsimshian language, which translates into a very contemporary message: *wai wai*, which means "Just do it."

The raven will judge whether he has succeeded.

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