

Up from Dependency

An aboriginal development expo, a native 'self-help' book and Canada's demographic decline all offer hope to the country's indigenous peoples

CYRIL DOLL



Native writer Calvin Helin, author of *Dances With Dependency*, with his editor, Candis McLean, at his book launch at Calgary's Westin Hotel, Nov. 24

Anyone looking to compare Canada's 130-year-old reservation system with how the rest of the country lives need look no further than the housing occupied by squatters on the Tsuu T'ina Nation reserve, bordering southwest Calgary. In October, Health Canada posted asbestos notices on the doors of the abandoned Harvie Barracks, Canadian Forces living quarters sited on the suburban reserve. Some of the squatters have complained to Calgary's two daily newspapers that the notice was a convoluted ploy to evict them, prior to the Tsuu T'ina Nation's breaking ground for a big casino project, just north of their slum. Others suspect that the city was getting tired of the squatters' decaying eyesore; their fading clapboard and crumbling sidewalks are just one block away from the sprawling bungalows of the booming city.

While Calgary has become the poster metropolis for the white-collar, resource-based economic boom, benefiting all of western Canada, evidence suggests that the boom has left the indigenous population behind—at least so far. In a broader perspective, however, the non-aboriginal Canadian population has a lower-than-replacement birthrate and is rapidly aging; and more and more jobs are being created, thanks to near-record resources prices. So economists have been warning of a "demographic tsunami," soon to overtake the country, regardless of immigration. Yet, as the baby boomers begin to retire and drain the social support system, at least some of the strain could be alleviated by the

aboriginal population and its three times higher fertility rate.

The empirical evidence on the plight of Canada's indigenous population is abundant. The 1995 royal commission on suicide in the aboriginal community found that native youth between 10 and 19 years old were five to six times more likely to commit suicide than non-aboriginals. Aboriginals make up only three per cent of the country's population, but they account for 19 per cent of provincial and 17 per cent of federal incarcerations, says the *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. And while the unemployment rate in Canada is at or near record lows—6.2 per cent in October, according to Statistics Canada—the rate for aboriginals is slightly less than 20 per cent—and some northern reserves have rates as high as 80 per cent.

Such depressing statistics—and the reality behind them—elicit questions of why and how this has happened. Calvin Helin, president of the Native Investment and Trade Association, and author of the book *Dances with Dependency: Indigenous Success through Self-Reliance*, says that over the past 100 years, plainly, aboriginals have been corrupted into a culture of dependency, reliant on politically correct government handouts. And like most authors of self-help books, he says the first step to overcoming the addiction is realizing the problem exists in the first place. "We have to take ownership of our problems, and realize the fact of the matter is nobody's going to take care of the problems. What's happened is that the chiefs have been conditioned to asking the government for more money—but it's that money that's the problem," he says.

Canadian taxpayers today prop up the First Nations and the Inuit to the tune of \$9 billion per year—about \$10,000 for every man, woman and child. The royal commission report recommends that number should increase by \$2 billion by 2016, and Helin warns, if the Metis are granted the same rights as indigenous Canadians, the sum could balloon to \$36 billion. Helin claims in his book that the feds spend 57 per cent per capita more on natives than on non-natives.

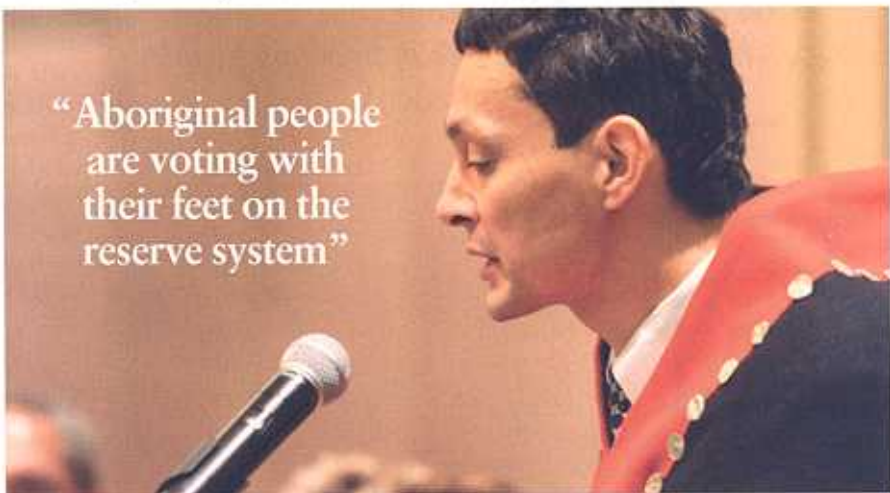
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FIRST NATIONS

But who's going to pay that bill when the baby boomers start retiring? Sherri Torjman, vice-president of the Ottawa-based Caledon Institute of Social Policy, says the number of Canadians reaching retirement age (65) by 2026 will double

oil sands of northeast Alberta—the second-largest reserves in the world, at 175 billion barrels—have almost \$100 billion worth of projects on the books. This creates an unprecedented opportunity for aboriginal youth, he says, noting that after completing an apprenticeship, aboriginals could earn as much as \$48 an

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to almost 8 million. In 2001, seniors accounted for 13 per cent of the population; today, they make up 21 per cent. “Our population is aging more rapidly than most developed countries,” Torjman warns.

The answer to the problem could lie in a higher rate of aboriginals entering the workforce. A 2001 report on aboriginal economic participation (prepared for the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Aboriginal Affairs and National Aboriginal Leaders) showed that only 54 per cent of working-age aboriginals are employed, compared to 71 per cent of non-aboriginals. The report concluded that to achieve employment parity, 80,000 jobs would be required. That might seem like a lot, but the province of Alberta alone claims that by 2010, they'll have an unfilled job surplus of 100,000. “As the boomer generation retires and labour becomes scarcer, industry is going to have to start looking to new sources of labour, and inevitably they're going to start looking at First Nations people and Metis,” says Christine Couture, executive director of Alberta's labour force partnerships.

Which is a win-win situation for industry and aboriginals, says Jeff Pardee, general manager of the Northeast Alberta Aboriginal Business Association. Speaking in Calgary on Nov. 21, at the Aboriginal Energy and Resource Development Expo, Pardee says the

hour working as a heavy-duty mechanic.

It's not just the oil sands where growth and opportunity exists. Also speaking at the AERDE conference was Teresa Ryan, the executive director of the Tsimshian Nation and the science adviser for the Gitxaala First Nation, both on B.C.'s northern coast. Ryan spoke of the opportunities available for aboriginals to use their knowledge of the land to alleviate their plight. So, for example, Gitxaala are exploring the establishment of fish farms as a way to relieve native unemployment in northern B.C. “Unemployment—200 years ago we didn't know what that was,” she says.

Helin says the purpose for which he wrote his book was the self-preservation of aboriginals, and the fact that these truths had to be told by a native. “Aboriginal people don't like to air what they perceive as their dirty laundry in public,” he says. “It might give fodder to people who are racist; but on the other hand, [they've] totally stifled discussion.”

The good news is, change is already coming, says Helin. Young people are starting to realize that a life on a reserve, whether in government housing or squatting in shacks, simply isn't worth it. Only 29 per cent of Indians and Inuit in Canada live on reserves, he notes in his book, while 50 per cent live in the city. “The young people are getting more educated, and aboriginal people are voting with their feet on the reserve system.” **WS**