



Letters to the Editor

Editorials

Two sides of the track

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A railway is a powerful symbol, with strongly divergent meanings depending on which side of the tracks you sit. To Canadians, it is the mythical ribbon of steel that tied the country together in an era of nation-building.

To native people, it is a reminder of territory lost as the rest of Canada grew rich through the movement of people and freight. That is why some native leaders have called for blockades of rail lines this summer to press the federal government on long-standing grievances.

Top among the complaints is that the system by which land claims are settled is not working. The claims stem from unresolved disputes over rights or government obligations contained within statutes and treaties. Indeed, since the resolution process was established in 1973, a fraction of the claims have been settled. The claims are complex but the deck is stacked against native bands -- Ottawa, itself a party to the dispute, decides if claims will be compensated, even if they have been determined valid by the Indian Claims Commission that was established to expedite the process.

News reports indicate that Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice is on the verge of putting bite into the claims resolution process, giving the commission the clout to order that valid claims be compensated. That would be a welcome reform.

That is not the only source of discontent among native leaders, however. Rejecting scattered calls to violence and rail-line blockades, Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, warned it is getting tough to keep the anger at bay. Angry himself at the Harper government's rejection of the multi-billion dollar Kelowna Accord, last week he joined the chorus calling for meaningful progress on land claims, but also for increased federal spending to address native poverty.

In Winnipeg, on the same day, Calvin Helin, a British Columbia native lawyer and businessman, told a luncheon that reliance on government payments is the source of native poverty. The public transfers are part of the welfare trap and unrelenting dependency that has erased the centuries-long self-sufficiency of aboriginal people, he said. He noted native leaders and governments themselves are dependent upon that dependency. The author of a self-published book, *Dances with Dependency*, Mr. Helin exhorted native people to look to private business and income to reverse the devastating damage done by colonialism and the paternalistic Indian Act.

Mr. Fontaine should be congratulated for calming the threats from some native people. His demands for speedy resolution of aging land claims need to be heeded. But where he and

others see the railways as a symbol of grievance and mounting crisis, Mr. Helin would see a means of trade and opportunity. Mr. Fontaine offers native people more of the same; Mr. Helin sees a brighter path.