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Aboriginals' hatred of Tories a good thing

By JOSEPH QUESNEL

As National Aboriginal Day ends, aboriginals should take stock of what has been achieved in recent years.

It has become accepted wisdom from the aboriginal leadership elite that the current government is the worst thing to happen to First Nations in a long time. Of course, this idea filters to the masses who repeat it.

While not perfect, the government has achieved much on the aboriginal file. It is just they are the changes the aboriginal elites do not like because they empower individuals and reduce their collective power.

Paul Martin was loved by aboriginal organizations because he kowtowed to their demands, even if the solutions they called for were bad for aboriginals. In the case of the Kelowna Accord, Martin turned on the funding tap yet failed to deliver on accountability for dollars spent.

It is clear money is not the solution to aboriginal problems. As aboriginal author Calvin Helin argues, if money were the answer there would be no poverty in aboriginal communities, as the government annually spends billions on aboriginal affairs.

Prior to that, Martin killed the First Nations Governance Act, a bill ensuring transparency for First Nation governments. All of this was great political symbolism and gave the Liberals an image of being for aboriginals, but they did nothing for the average status Indian living in hopelessness.

TEST OF A GOOD GOVERNMENT

I firmly believe the test of a good government when it comes to aboriginals is to be hated, not loved, by the aboriginal elite. Since coming to power, the Conservatives sidestepped Kelowna. As the Accord did not provide safeguards to ensure money would not simply go to band governments to squander, this is good.

But there must be an alternative. The long-term solution would be to allow private investment onto reserves. This way these communities can develop a tax base to fund education and social services.

Then Ottawa moved on the issue of matrimonial property rights. In the event of marital breakdown, women on reserves are often left without property. This move was supported by aboriginal women's organizations. Instead of praise, the move was not given much attention.

The next move was most important. The government announced they would extend human rights protection to aboriginals who fall under the Indian Act. A monumental change, as it allows status Indians redress if band governments violate their rights.

Next, there would be a decision to grant mortgages for aboriginal communities. Rather than rely on band council housing, aboriginals would be able to own their homes. While limited, this move could signal a change towards private ownership on reserves and community wealth creation.

Rather than celebrate, these changes barely made national headlines.

Most recently, the government announced reforms of the specific land claims process. This is revolutionary because it has the potential to address more grievances over a shorter time frame. Granted this has received more attention, but aboriginal elites still harp on the negatives.

What unites these changes is their preference for tangible change over symbolic politics. Let's hope it stays that way.