

BOOK REVIEW

Dances With Dependency: Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance

Calvin Helin

Vancouver: Orca Spirit Publishing & Communications Inc., 2006

ISBN 0-97821-07-0; 313 pp; \$34.95

.....

Yale D. Belanger

DEPARTMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE

Much has been written in recent years of the federal government's continued financing of Indian Affairs. With an estimated annual budget hovering around \$9 billion, critics argue that unchecked largesse forces Aboriginal peoples' dependency on federal handouts. The sooner the public trough is closed, maintain groups such as the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, the sooner Aboriginal people can reclaim their economic, political, and social dignity. In response, the Assembly of First Nations and other national watchdog groups stress that an inept Indian and Northern Affairs bureaucracy is to blame; having mismanaged what is arguably Canada's constitutional legacy to ensure Aboriginal peoples' continued financial protection and social development. Proper financial management, they counter, combined with mothballing Indian Affairs will provide the foundation needed to promote effective and sustainable economic growth.

Somewhere in the middle of these two extremes falls Calvin Helin, author of the provocative book *Dances With Dependency: Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance*. But don't let the light-hearted title of the book mislead you — the author strategically indicts all parties he believes compromise Aboriginal economic aspirations and social progress. One of his primary targets is Aboriginal leaders who consciously choose to remain dependent upon federal funds instead

of seeking out innovative economic development strategies. The reason: promoting economic independence by challenging communities to become healthier through individual achievement and personal advancement puts these leaders' secure, well-paying, federally-sponsored jobs at risk. In his opinion, the Indian Affairs system, the operations of which have changed little since its 1880 establishment, spawns political and economic elites in Aboriginal communities. These individuals in turn promote continued reliance upon federal funding initiatives for their own financial security and political advancement.

A lawyer, businessman, and son of a hereditary Tsimshian chief from the northern B.C. community of Lax Kwalaams (Port Simpson), Helin also denounces those leaders who resist integrating their communities into the surrounding regional and provincial economies for fear of corrupting their culture. In response he quoted one leader as saying he would "prefer economic integration to starvation."

Aboriginal leaders are not Helin's only target, however. The author insists that Canadian officials preserve Constitutionally-entrenched Aboriginal rights while also ensuring treaty protected resources remain in First Nation's hands, issues that are generally beyond the scope of public policy makers but occasionally come under political fire. He also aggressively advocates for

Aboriginal control of local economic development, which can be achieved by removing these communities from a federal funding structure that has historically done little to promote and ensure Aboriginal economic well-being.

Helin tackles these and other difficult issues with empathy that could only be proffered by someone who has faced similar issues first hand. But unlike many of his peers, he has little sympathy for those who make a habit of consistently revisiting the troubled and turbulent history of Aboriginal-non-Native interaction. Establishing the necessary political and economic relationships needed to confront contemporary issues is tricky enough without the spectre of historic misdeeds guiding our relationships, leading Helin to conclude that obsessing about past injustices makes it impossible to promote future economic progress.

Helin is at his best when discussing what he describes as the demographic tsunami soon to hit Canada, the brunt of which will slam the prairies. This not only sets the context for his overall argument, it is a unique interpretation of anticipated statistical trends. Specifically, he demonstrates that unprecedented Aboriginal population growth combined with increased baby-boomer retirement rates could lead to a demographic tsunami—too few replacement workers leading to economic stagnation that in turn leaves limited funds available for the social programming many Aboriginal people remain reliant upon. Such a trend if left unchecked could irreparably harm the Canadian economy.

In a typical “taking lemons and making lemonade” approach, Helin suggests that the parallel surge in the number of workforce age Aboriginals is advantageous in two ways. First, these individuals once trained are perfect replacements for retiring baby-boomers. Second, the related increase in Aboriginal employment rates will likely offset existing social programming costs thereby easing the pressure being exerted on the various federal agencies currently responsible for Aboriginal financial affairs. A third advantage he fails to identify is the potential for integrated workforces to breed cultural sensitivity and positive community relationships.

Such optimistic pronouncements suggest that *Dances With Dependency* is not a doomsday book, and it should not be mistaken as one. In addition to identifying systemic inadequacies, Helin has also taken the time to offer simple solutions aimed at improving economic development and, in turn, Aboriginal self-sufficiency. Take, for example, his suggestion that big business consult Aboriginal communities prior to resource exploration. Evidence shows that straightforward gestures by corporate leaders go a long way toward fostering positive business relationships with Aboriginal leaders and their communities—goodwill tends to break down cultural barriers leading to positive and profitable enterprises.

If there was a negative aspect to this book it was Helin’s sweeping generalizations that cast all Aboriginal leaders as naïve at best and at worst corrupt. This is a difficult pitfall to overcome. Nationally there are a number of First Nations communities that have overcome tremendous odds only to become regional and, in certain cases, provincial business leaders. Unfortunately, he only briefly mentions a handful of these examples. This is however not enough to recommend against a stimulating read destined to send shock waves through a number of Aboriginal communities nationally.

The question we must ask at this point is simply this, Is Helin’s assessment correct? I believe his general appraisal of reserve economics and the existing barriers to success to be accurate. And his description of the demographic tsunami is convincing enough to force us to question why we see so few Aboriginal people occupying well-paying jobs in Canadian society, especially after taking into consideration ever increasing Aboriginal university and college graduation rates. No matter how innovative the efforts devoted to ending the *Dances with Dependency*, until similar barriers are eradicated establishing true economic development and community well-being will remain, as Helin argues, dependent upon the will of outsiders with little vested interest in Aboriginal development.