



Native affairs: Native wisdom; Canada's indigenous people have a lot to offer if they can control their fate.

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In the mid-1960s, a meeting occurred between several chiefs of the Mi'kmaq Nation and the government of Canada. The agenda on the table was an age-old one involving the claims of the Mi'kmaq to the land and waters of their traditional territory in Eastern Canada. During the meeting, one of the chiefs made a comment that was either comical or deeply profound. "I am not a wise man, nor educated in your school system," said the chief. "I, however, have read a few newspapers, a few books and a few historical documents. It is the historical documents that interest me the most, especially the shipping ledgers that itemized every piece of cargo that has ever been sent from outside of Canada to the shores of our great lands. What amazes me the most is the fact that I cannot find any record of how much land your people have brought to North America! Why is that?"

And, so, we can summarize the history of the relationship between the Canadian government and its indigenous peoples (which includes Metis, on-reserve and off-reserve First Nations, and Inuit

peoples) as one rooted in land-claim issues and controversy. It is impossible to ignore this history, which provides the context for the present and will shape our future. Yet, looking to Canada in 2020, the question we must ask is: Will the past continue to overshadow future opportunity — or can a new relationship arise? The key to a new future lies in successful economic development, where indigenous people are empowered to contribute to the Canadian economy in a meaningful way.

The economic potential for both is staggering. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996 calculated that it costs the government \$7.5 billion annually to provide services such as health care, education and infrastructure to indigenous people. It also calculated that if these same people had complete autonomy — meaning they controlled the lands, including leases, and all businesses and business opportunities on the lands, and access to them — there would potentially be a \$17.3-billion shift on the balance sheet by 2016. Indigenous peoples would actually be contributing to the economy to the tune of more than \$9.8 billion.

While the assumption at the heart of this calculation — complete land control — may seem like a stretch, I would like to describe a very real example of how a native community successfully turned itself around to demonstrate that it can be done. The end result was that this community's financial situation changed from receiving \$4.2 million in government funding in 1996, to one that has a 2007 budget of \$76 million, \$45 million in assets and is contributing more than \$250 million to the overall economy. In the process, employment has skyrocketed to 680 from 20.

This band of 1,100 based in Nova Scotia, including myself, followed what I call the Progression Model, which can be easily adopted by other bands coast-to-coast to create more financially independent native communities and reshape the financial future of this country.

To begin, there was an enormous communications hurdle to overcome, and it straddled both sides of the reservation property line. Inspired by the prospect of change, we had to help those on the reserve understand how those off the reserve think, and understand the motivations and inner workings of government and business, then hold up a mirror to show what the current situation would look like to outsiders. Once we did this, we rallied behind our vision: embracing the global marketplace.

We quickly realized that for economic development to succeed, critical business-related policies and procedures had to be developed. We had to fix our books, establish financial and human resources protocols, and embrace transparency and accountability. The band implemented a Canadian Aboriginal first — it posted its financial statements, depressing as they may have been, on the Internet to demonstrate this commitment to openness.

Further proof of our willingness to change was in the hiring of professionals from the outside world (those community members who had to leave, because no opportunities for their skills previously existed) to work with us. Then we could speak with government, paint a credible picture of what we wanted and why, and show the proof: a financial administration policy, a personnel policy and the like.

It worked. First, we negotiated increased funding to support us in the pursuit of our vision and to enable us to hire experts in health and education, as well as bring business people back onto the reserve. We developed programs to educate the band's government, and worked on our skills — everything from media training to understanding world economies through a speaker's program covering topics such as the outlook for the North American economy, world markets, management governance and board governance.

We implemented budgeting practices, started saving and obtained an ISO 9001.2000 designation, an internationally recognized management systems standard that indicates that what you say you do is what you actually do. Then — and only then — were we prepared to go after business, and business would be open to work with us. We were initially approached by Lockheed Martin to bid on a \$5-billion helicopter deal. Soon, the likes of Boeing, Sodexo, SNC-Lavalin and other businesses such as accounting firms were knocking down our doors. We built a convention centre, data storage centres, and even negotiated for our own Starbucks. All over the span of 10 years.

There are more than 630 First Nation bands, and 1.2 million Aboriginals in this country. If we presume a success rate of only 30% of what this band achieved — that would do nicely. This is a reasonable objective if — and only if — Canadians are prepared to direct their governments to fulfill legal obligations that arise from the first settlement in Canada. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996 laid out a reasonable plan of action that called for shared sovereignty, and it should be read by all Canadians. The question of land entitlements would eventually be moot.

What is worth noting about the success experienced by the Nova Scotia band is the role of the private sector. Solving the aboriginal challenge was not simply a government-native exercise. Every day, companies build railways, transmission lines, roads, fibre-optic cable lines, pulp-and-paper plants, mines and office towers across the country, which often, of necessity, involve encounters with indigenous people and will continue to do so. But more than this, native populations have the potential to be skilled and unskilled workforces that can be engaged by business once both sides understand each other.

For large-scale change along the lines of the case described above, there are a number of philosophical, structural and process changes that need to occur. Canadian society has developed as most societies have. It went from a hunter-gatherer-based economy, to an agricultural one and then an industrial one, and now to a high-tech society. But we, the indigenous people, have missed the industrial age due to a variety of poor decisions thrust upon us, including the Indian Act of Canada, governments sending our children away to residential schools, and a refusal to recognize the inherit rights of aboriginal peoples to their own land and water grounded in the laws of Canada.

Obviously, education is also essential, but it must be done in a way that is relevant. That means, first and foremost, that the educators themselves should be indigenous (which, of course, requires them to be trained somewhere) and the curriculum must involve native history and languages to engage and resonate with the populations they are trying to reach. Education must prepare people for the challenges of working within a global economy. The drivers must be their own people, and emphasis must be on their development.

But adopting the proper financial systems can't be underestimated. The private and public sectors need to have confidence in the fiscal management of the bands they work with. They need to see financial accountability and defined rules of engagement for business interactions, which create a common language and trust that is necessary to do business. As with teachers, professionals must be trained and then brought to communities to teach these skills.

In short, the indigenous economy should focus on the tools that create a situation of credibility and consistency. Then it will be ready to grab a hold of its new and/or re-educated workforce and prepare for enhancing itself. This could be in the form of developing opportunities through

marketing, business and other economic plans involving partnerships, joint ventures or the development of its own businesses.

This progression model will work. It is a model that fits with how Canadians view themselves, both domestically and internationally. It is a model that shows we can work together to make our country a better place to live.

As indigenous economies grow, it is imperative that Canadians seriously consider a more co-management approach to governing. We must allow indigenous world views to be part of the puzzle. How else do we deal with the massive amounts of money it would take to settle land claims? It is surprising how similar and yet different we are.

We can all work together. We share one piece of Mother Earth called Canada. Why fight over it?