

2013 – MHF Comment – Aboriginal/Canada Relations – Protests and Solutions

The Canadian government must work WITH our aboriginal leadership, with provincial and territorial governments, and with the private sector – together – to address the challenges that have been plaguing our aboriginal communities for generations.

Liberals have done this before. In 2004 and 2005, the work putting together the Kelowna Accord by the Liberal government of the day, First Nations, Métis Nation, and Inuit leadership, as well as provincial and territorial governments of all partisan stripes -- all working together -- was impressive. But as soon as Harper took power in 2006, he tossed it aside and ignored it all.

Colonialism, abuse of treaty rights, residential schools – successive governments must share that responsibility. Yet Harper's answer now is to simply criticize and allege aboriginal mismanagement. What he has completely missed is that the answer is not money alone – most upsetting is that he has destroyed any sense of the much-needed cooperation, of working together, of respectful engagement – it's gone.

And where are we now? Far too many aboriginal Canadians are still living in deplorable conditions, are not gaining the education that they need to ensure equality of opportunity, and are not appropriately benefitting from economic development, particularly of natural resources, to ensure the prosperity that is critical to their long-term success.

The Idle No More movement was born of understandable frustration with this lack of progress. Chief Spence is sacrificing her health, hopefully not her life, to get people to realize just how dire things are, not only for her own community of Attawapiskat, but for many others.

Yet Stephen Harper's hypocrisy and political gamesmanship only rubs salt in the wounds.

I had a front row seat for the residential school apology in the House of Commons in June, 2008. It was impressive, emotional, and full of hope. But I couldn't avoid the nagging sense that it was still all politics for Harper. The hypocrisy loomed large. He completely ignored all the heavy-lifting groundwork for the apology done by Liberals, including Jane Stewart and Herb Gray. But worse, here was the man who destroyed the ground-breaking Kelowna Accord, for which Paul Martin and so many others had worked so hard.

As soon as he was elected in 2006, Harper and his government did everything to avoid implementation of the Kelowna commitments. He calls for more accountability and transparency – yet hides changes to environmental and land regulations, buried in his omnibus Bill C-45. Rather than tackle the need to replace the paternalistic *Indian Act* with a respectful, mutually agreed-to regime, Harper's condescension continues. We have a government which has given us plenty of pomp, circumstance, and rhetoric, but which has only made things worse.

Imagine what implementing the Kelowna Accord could have done, particularly had we started 6 years ago as planned: \$1.8 billion for targeted investments in education, school systems, and to train more aboriginal teachers; \$1.6 billion for housing and clean water; \$1.3 billion for health services; \$200 million for economic development; and \$170 million to assist with accountability to those the Accord was to help. Investments in education were to raise the high school graduation rate of aboriginal Canadians to match that of the rest of the population, and to encourage more post-secondary graduation. The investments in health targeted infant mortality, youth suicide, childhood obesity, and diabetes, aimed for 20 per cent reductions over five years, and 50 per cent over 10 years, as well as a doubling of the number of health professionals over 10 years.

Kelowna would not have solved all of the challenges, particularly the need to address long-standing treaty and title rights. But it would have been a great start. And hugely important was the breakthrough that Kelowna represented in terms of approach. For the first time, First Nations, Métis Nation, and Inuit leadership, and federal, provincial and territorial governments – of all partisan stripes – came to the table in partnership. Harper, instead, has turned his back on this multi-partisan approach. He has walked away from any form of cooperation. He has brought back a paternalistic attitude that others worked hard for years to put behind us.

Now, here we are in 2013 and still nothing has been done.

Economic prosperity is key for these communities. How can we accomplish that? And it is indeed “We”, as we are all in this together. Over 400,000 young First Nations, Métis Nation, and Inuit people will enter the workforce in the next 10 years – an astounding number. But far too many will not have finished high school, let alone university, college, or trade programs. They will need jobs. On the other hand, Canadian businesses need skilled workers – so much so that we are bringing in more and more temporary foreign workers to fill those jobs. The disconnect is extraordinary. At the same time, however, the opportunities are great – but government, business and aboriginal leadership need to cooperate much more, working to match the education and training with the skills needed.

Business is on board. The Canadian Council of CEOs, in its July 2012 submission to Canada’s provincial and territorial leaders entitled *Framing an Energy Strategy for Canada*, has called for “a renewed and purposeful commitment from governments and Aboriginal leaders. One priority is to ensure government authorities responsible for education work with the business community and Aboriginal representatives to design a tripartite solution to combating the related problems of underemployment of Aboriginal youth and current labour shortages.”

The Council’s report acknowledges that aboriginal peoples have “legitimate concerns” about major resource developments, “including implications for land claims, the impact on their communities and way of life, as well as on the land, air and water around them.” It acknowledges that aboriginal peoples must be true partners in resource and energy projects, together with governments and businesses. For First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities to better realize the benefits of economic development, the report calls for “new thinking on the process, scope and funding of consultation and engagement. There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to the large array of resource development projects and the number of distinctive Aboriginal communities. Yet we can learn from best practices currently being undertaken in some development projects and seek to employ them more broadly as appropriate. “

Action is needed – on everyone's part. Protest raises awareness – but progress requires concrete solutions. And for that, we need to work together – aboriginal leadership, governments, and business. Aboriginal leadership is trying; business is trying – but we have a complete lack of any leadership from Stephen Harper and his government.

The Liberal Party I lead will once again cooperate – and bring other governments together again, of all parties, to cooperate – in partnership with our Aboriginal communities and Canadian businesses in finding real solutions.