

Protests Raise Awareness -- Progress Requires Concrete Solutions

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Protests create awareness -- real solutions are harder to come by. Centuries of colonialism, discrimination, abuse of treaty rights, residential schools and a suffocating paternalism still plague this country and our aboriginal communities. Solutions will only come from respect and cooperation among all governments, all political parties, aboriginal leadership and business. The 2006 Kelowna Accord was groundbreaking - more even for **how** it was achieved than for the financial help it was to provide. The Harper government destroyed not only the Accord, but the all-important sense of respect and cooperation that the Accord represented.

Far too many aboriginal Canadians live in deplorable conditions, cannot access the education they need to ensure equality of opportunity, and do not benefit 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 lack of progress. Chief Spence is sacrificing her health in order to remind people just how dire things are, not only for her own community of Attawapiskat, but for many others.

Harper's only response is to criticize back. His hypocrisy and political gamesmanship only rub salt in the wounds. We haven't progressed at all -- we've gone backward.

The residential school apology in the House of Commons in June 2008 was impressive, emotional, and full of hope. I had a front row seat. But it was all politics for Harper. He completely ignored the heavy-lifting groundwork for the apology done by others such as Jane Stewart and Herb Gray. But worse, it was Harper himself who destroyed the ground-breaking Kelowna Accord, for which his predecessor Paul Martin and so many others had worked so hard.

Imagine what implementing the Kelowna Accord could have done, particularly if it has started in 2006: \$1.8 billion for targeted investments in education and school systems, to train more aboriginal teachers, to raise the high school graduation rate of aboriginal Canadians, and to encourage more post-secondary graduation; \$1.6 billion for housing and clean water; \$1.3 billion for health services, targeting infant mortality, youth suicide, childhood obesity and diabetes; \$200 million and \$170 million for economic development and accountability, respectively.

Kelowna would not have solved all of the issues, but it would have been a great start. And it was critical that for the first time, First Nations, Métis Nation and Inuit leadership, and multi-partisan federal, provincial and territorial governments, all worked together in partnership. Harper, instead, has walked away from any form of cooperation, and has brought back a paternalistic attitude that others worked so hard to put behind us.

Economic prosperity is key. Over 400,000 young aboriginal Canadians 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. Yet Canadian businesses need skilled workers, bringing in temporary foreign workers to fill the gap. The disconnect is extraordinary -- but on the other hand, the opportunities are great.

The Canadian Council of CEOs, in its July 2012 submission to Canada's provincial and territorial leaders entitled *Framing an Energy Strategy for Canada*, 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 also acknowledges that aboriginal peoples must be true partners in resource and energy projects. In calling for "new thinking", it says that "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. Aboriginal leadership is trying; business is trying – but we have a complete vacuum of leadership from Stephen Harper and his government.