

"Politically Speaking"

Martha Hall Findlay, former MP for Willowdale

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ABORIGINAL / CANADA RELATIONS -- PART 2

Last month, I wrote about the current challenges facing aboriginal peoples in Canada – the extreme poverty, the terrible living conditions among so many, the substance abuse, the neglect – and the epidemic level of youth suicide. I wrote of the large amounts of money spent by governments without apparent long term success, and the resulting frustrations of many non-aboriginal Canadians who see this side of it, but who don't have a real understanding of so much of the background. So I wrote briefly of the history of how and why the situation is as it is – and how most Canadians, frustratingly, know very little about the true, and often upsetting history of our own country, its aboriginal peoples and the interactions between them and the European newcomers.

The challenges don't just affect aboriginal peoples. The economic, cultural and social problems that are far too common among aboriginal Canadians also affect the rest of us, as Canadians – in different ways, and not as directly or as harshly, but they do. For example, over the next decade, 400,000 aboriginal youth will be entering the work force. Half a million! Yet far too many of those young people will not have any more than a high school education. Worse, far, far too many will not have even finished high school. This means two things: huge challenges for those 400,000 seeking work, and huge challenges for Canada as a whole in dealing with the economic and social consequences of so many people so unprepared, and correspondingly so likely to be burdens on society rather than assets.

On the other hand, Canada has an abundance of natural resources that the world is clamouring for. Big opportunities lie in increasing our continental pipeline

capacity, increased access to the rapidly-growing Asian markets and the US for our oil and natural gas, expansion of hydro capacity, and the mineral resources we have across the country. Many of these resources and/or transportation routes lie in or near aboriginal communities, which offers immense opportunity for the aboriginal communities in this country to participate in the economic prosperity that these activities bring.

The opportunity for Aboriginal peoples to participate in a prosperous economic future. The economic benefits are clear – the social and community benefits from greater prosperity are immense. Aboriginal peoples need to embrace these opportunities. The duty to consult and accommodate, for example, was created by judges to ensure that aboriginal people had a seat at the table when decisions are made about resource development. Unfortunately, too many have treated it as an economic bargaining chip, as a way to block certain projects. It was meant as a way to move forward, and both sides need to see it that way, in order for aboriginal peoples to actively participate in the long-term economic activity these opportunities present.

For their part, Canadian governments (federal, provincial and even occasionally municipal) need to do their part to help ensure the necessary education and training that those 400,000 people will need to be able to participate.

So far, we Canadians, aboriginal and non-aboriginal alike, have not done well in promoting effective aboriginal participation in the wealth and opportunities this country has. But we must.

For this to work, as I noted last month in Part I, the first step is for all Canadians, non-aboriginal in particular, to learn the truth about what has happened to generations of aboriginal peoples, why, and how much of that history explains the current challenges. Only by understanding this history can both aboriginal

and non-aboriginal Canadians truly work together, replacing paternalism and misinformation with mutual respect and understanding. Only then will the key economic discussions be effective for the long term – something that ALL Canadians need to have happen.

If you have any questions or comments on this, or any other issue, please write to me at info@marthahallfindlay.ca, or to PO Box 69522, 5845 Yonge St., Willowdale, ON, M2M 4K3.

All best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MHF' with a flourish at the end.

Martha Hall Findlay