

# AN ABORIGINAL 'GLASNOST'

**On the Osoyoos reserve in the Okanagan, "real warriors hold a job!" is the motto. Fewer handouts, less social aid: a radical fix for native woes.**

By **NANCY MACDONALD** | September 3, 2007 |

There is no housing shortage on the 13,000-hectare Osoyoos reserve, tucked deep in B.C.'s bone-dry interior. Nor are there any apparent signs of poverty. In fact, some of the fanciest facilities in this corner of the Okanagan Valley are on band land. The Osoyoos Indian Band's school and health centre are more architecturally advanced than anything in neighbouring Oliver or Osoyoos -- a tourist town that swells from 5,000 to 20,000 during summer. And the adobe-style Spirit Ridge resort, perched high above Lake Osoyoos, offers the best views, by far, of desert and turquoise waters. They've even got the best public art: massive metal sculptures by U.S. artist Virgil "Smoker" Marchand. Truly, the 440-member band puts the surrounding towns to shame -- a cheerful inversion of the Canadian standard.



Blame it on the chief. When Clarence Louie was first elected in 1984, at age 24, the Osoyoos were bankrupt. Like most native bands, they were marooned on marginal land, and crippled by welfare dependency and sky-high unemployment. Health problems as well as social pathologies -- corruption, violence -- were rampant. Two decades on, the tiny band is a regional powerhouse, pumping an annual \$40 million into the B.C. economy. It owns nine businesses, including an award-winning winery, and is the biggest employer in the south Okanagan. And its tough-talking chief and CEO is fast becoming a national icon. "We're no longer the ghetto next door," says Louie, 47, nodding toward two non-native women sweeping the Nk'Mip winery's brick patio.

"Across the country, Aboriginal leaders know: if you want to start a development project, you go pay Chief Louie a visit," says Liberal-era Indian affairs minister Bob Nault, who is still firmly plugged into the Aboriginal community. "He probably gets more phone calls than any native leader in the country."

Louie spends one week of every month on the road, preaching the business gospel to mixed audiences. On this day, there are 50 speaking invites piled on the desk of his wood-panelled office in the band's modest corporate headquarters, near Oliver. "I don't give the usual Indian speech: that we fly with the eagles, run with the buffalo, swim with the salmon and beat with one heartbeat," he says. "I want to talk about creating jobs and making money." Blaming government? That time is over, he tells cross-country audiences. Join the real world. Get off welfare. Quit your sniffing. If your life sucks it's because you suck. Our ancestors worked for a living; so should you. To the irritation of some band members, diluted versions of these mantras -- such as "Real Warriors Hold A Job!" -- are posted on burgundy-and-white signs across the reserve. Louie is a provocateur; he lives to offend.

But there is a broader verse here. Louie is part of an emerging group of distinguished Aboriginals and native leaders who are advocating a complete native mind shift. Echoing the critic and wit H.L. Mencken, these dissenters, who include Patrick Brazeau, national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and Vancouver lawyer and businessperson Calvin Helin, argue that economic independence is the only freedom worth a damn. They call for an end to the system of federal dependency that has crippled Aboriginal peoples, and advocate progress through integration into the mainstream economy.

Helin, for one, calls for an Aboriginal "glasnost," after the policy of openness and freer information initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in late-Soviet Russia. To Helin, a Tsimshian raised in the coastal village of Lax Kw'alaams and educated in Victoria and the Lower Mainland, nothing should be off-bounds. Aboriginal self-governance? "Meaningless," he says, so long as it is federally funded. The timing is right: Helin sees a crisis on the horizon. The Aboriginal population is growing seven times as fast as the mainstream population. Meanwhile, the Métis are winning court challenges that establish the same rights and benefits as status Indians. He says Canada can't sustain the current level of funding to the growing Aboriginal population at a time when a third of the Canadian population is set to retire; there has to be another way.



The Osoyoos present a shining alternative. From the start, Louie's kept eyes trained on the bottom line. His first major success came early, when he turned around the band's small but heavily indebted vineyard. For a year, Louie let the operation bleed while he quietly analyzed it. He pinpointed its structural flaws, fired its ineffectual manager, and in 1986, the winery announced its first profit. In 1987, as the vineyard doled out its first round of employee benefits, Louie launched a construction company. Ten years later, the Osoyoos were rolling out the big-ticket businesses: a \$30-million hillside resort; a \$9-million cultural centre, which offers rattlesnake interpretive sessions and hiking trails through the hills; a \$3-million destination winery overlooking Osoyoos Lake; a golf course and a ready-mix concrete plant. (The band has also partnered in the Mount Baldy ski development, and its 400-hectare vineyards supply grapes to vintners such as Jackson-Triggs and Mission Hill.) "It would have been easier to do what a lot of bands do, and just chase federal government grant programs," says Louie. "It's tougher running businesses. But we're going from welfare to work."

Not all bands are located on tourist tracks like Napa North. Still, a quarter of First Nations should be pursuing his strategy, says Louie. "Some oil-money bands bring in tens of millions in royalties. But their people are sitting at Great Depression unemployment rates, year after year." Instead of doling out billions in "negative spending" -- on jails, alcohol treatment centres, healing lodges -- we have to get the economic wheel turning, he says.

Two years ago, Louie made it to an Assembly of First Nations meeting, his first in 20 years as chief. "I only went because it was the first time the grand chief was hosting a conference on economic development. Every year, \$9 billion is spent on Aboriginals.

Two per cent of that goes toward economic development. The rest goes to social spending. That's been the formula for 100 years. Where has that gotten us? Absolute poverty."

Helin would agree. In *Dances with Dependency*, a book he published last year, he blasts the so-called Indian industry, the lawyers, consultants and government bureaucrats who prosper from Aboriginal misery. But his real venom is reserved for native chiefs. He alleges a great many aren't interested in anything but keeping the federal gravy train rolling. "Right now, all the chiefs ask is: who are we going to blame for this? That's not a solution. At this stage of the game the useful question is: what are you going to do about it?"

To Patrick Brazeau, it is a problem of "too many" chiefs. He argues that Canada's 633 native communities should be slashed to 60. The Indian Act? Scrapped, and the \$9 billion in annual Aboriginal spending redirected. Right now, the lion's share is funnelled to on-reserve natives; meanwhile, 51 per cent of status Indians live off-reserve. Brazeau backs the Tories -- remarkable for a native leader. Since becoming national chief of CAP in 2006, the 32-year-old has been stepping on some toes. "In Ottawa there's only one Aboriginal organization that means anything," says Nault. "Patrick Brazeau is changing that."

He is a thorn in the side of Phil Fontaine, grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations. The two organizations have been at loggerheads since 2001, when CAP supported the controversial First Nations governance bill, which would have required bands to adopt minimum standards of accountability, such as holding regular elections and publishing financial records. The split deepened in 2005, when CAP opposed the failed Kelowna accord because accountability structures weren't built into the \$5-billion deal.

"We need that governance act reintroduced," Don Sandberg, Aboriginal policy fellow for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, says from remote Saskatchewan. He is partway through a two-year Aboriginal governance survey for the Winnipeg-based think tank. A Canadian first, it's not winning him friends. In July, he was ordered off the St. Theresa Point First Nation, a 3,000-member northern Manitoba community. Sandberg says its chief, who functions as band mayor, police chief, judge and jury, didn't like his line of inquiry. This is not the first time Sandberg has felt the strong arm of a chief. Ten years ago he was thrown off his home reserve, the Norway House Cree Nation, for speaking out against the dysfunction and corruption he witnessed. He has no rights in Norway House; he cannot access social services, or vote.

For a long time, he was just a voice in the wilderness. No more. "The mavericks are coming at this from different angles, but they're all saying the same thing: the status quo isn't going to get them anywhere," says Nault. "And they're right."