



No need for Kelowna Accord  
Progress on native affairs has never been so swift

Calgary Herald

Sunday, April 13, 2008

The Kelowna Accord, the principles of which former prime minister Paul Martin is attempting to impress upon the Conservative government through a private member's bill, was a plan for aboriginal development in health, housing and education.

It was a plan, however, in the way a sketch done on the back of an envelope is a builder's blueprint: Much necessary detail was absent. Also, the \$5 billion cost attached to it (over five or 10 years depending upon who one listened to) had been hastily cobbled together at Kelowna, B.C., in November 2005, as a nice round number to take into the election that Martin knew he would call a few weeks later.

Therefore, its iconic status among Liberals and the Assembly of First Nations notwithstanding, there is little reason to treat it as a guide to public policy.

Conference participants admitted at the time they had no idea how the money would be divided according to function, although the total pot, being a good \$2 billion more than the \$3 billion touted by the government just a week before the conference opened, suggested there should be plenty for everybody.

It was, to be kind, no more than a number attached to a list of good intentions, an aboriginal-affairs suite to complement equally vague-but-lofty Liberal aspirational objectives in climate change, day care, surgery wait-times, trade with China and the environment.

Martin's bill may resonate with those who conflate improved outcomes with the allocation of taxpayers' money to client groups generally. Yet, his attempt to disinter this skeleton is in keeping with its original conception: It is all about appearance.

A closer examination of Conservative stewardship suggests the government has actually spent considerably more new money on Indian Affairs than called for by the Kelowna Accord, and made material progress on problems affecting aboriginal life on and off reserve.

That would include accelerating specific-claims settlements -- disputes involving existing treaties, of which there were some 800 when the government changed -- comprehensive land claims, and the fallout from residential schools. Thus, by the end of 2007, more than 50 specific claims had been resolved, as well as a

\$1.4 billion comprehensive settlement with the James Bay Cree in northern Quebec, and a \$2.2 billion residential schools agreement.

As important however, is the philosophy Ottawa is trying to apply to problems highlighted at Kelowna, one Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl sees in terms of accountability and measuring

results. Many reserve miseries are systemic. Aboriginals can't own their homes, for instance, and lack constitutional mechanisms to hold band managements accountable. Once Ottawa remits money to a band council, the federal auditor general has no ability to trace how it is spent.

Rather than merely continuing to pour money into the top of this funnel, as former Indian Affairs minister Jim Prentice put it, the government has begun using a new model.

For instance, in last year's budget, it provided \$300 million in a two-year program for the so-called First Nations Market Housing Trust, intended to introduce private home-ownership on reserves.

Then, announcing more than \$600 million of new spending on native priorities over two years in the 2008 budget, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty commented that the government was shifting its focus from social services to economic development, and skills training.

Certainly, the government has also ponied up for specific Kelowna objectives, including \$600 million for off-reserve aboriginal housing and northern housing in the 2006 budget, money for clean drinking water, and a bill extending jurisdiction over native education in B.C. to aboriginal institutions.

However, its approach seems increasingly aimed at dealing with legal issues, then incenting behaviour likely to lead to self-reliance. That, and basic justice issues, such as how on-reserve matrimonial property shall be divided, and extending the protection of the Canadian Human Rights Act to reserves.

One understands why the Kelowna Accord had appeal for Martin, and the AFN.

It was the status quo; Ottawa plied band governments with money, and the chiefs represented a single window on aboriginal affairs.

However, this comfortable symbiosis hasn't worked for reserve residents. By striking out in a new direction, the Conservatives have shown they wish to foster real improvement. One has only to review progress thus far, to discern they have more of a plan than was ever contemplated at Kelowna.

© The Calgary Herald 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

---

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.