

FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL

A Presentation on Challenges of Community Economic Development

>> >> >><< << <<

Chief Billy Diamond

INTRODUCTION

The following is the keynote address of Chief Billy Diamond presented at the Fourth Annual General Assembly of the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (CANDO), which took place in Montreal, September 25 to 27, 1997.

Chief Diamond's speech was both timely and moving. In it he is direct and honest highlighting—in no uncertain terms—what must happen if economic development is going to have a positive impact on the future of Aboriginal communities in Canada. His message is as vitally important today as it was in 1997. In this presentation, Billy Diamond lists and describes many of the important challenges that Aboriginal leaders and community organizers must attempt to overcome if they hope to assist current and future entrepreneurs to capitalize on emerging economic opportunities.

To read more about the life and times of the James Bay Cree leader and businessman Billy Diamond, refer to the interesting and revealing biography *Chief: The Fearless Vision of Billy Diamond* by Roy MacGregor, Penguin Books Canada Ltd. (Viking Press), published in 1989.

— Warren I. Weir

Warren I. Weir, who provided the introduction to this presentation, is currently the Visiting Scholar teaching Aboriginal management courses in the MBA Program (1999/2000), College of Commerce, University of Saskatchewan. He teaches business and community economic development courses at the Chemainus Native College, Ladysmith, B.C. He is a member of the Education Committee for CANDO.

I thank you for the honour of giving this keynote address before your conference today.

The work that has been undertaken by CANDO in supporting economic development is an effort that I and others greatly appreciate and continue to support.

I share the concern that a priority for all Aboriginal leaders is to ensure that the human, physical, and financial resources available to our people are used wisely. We must ensure that there are continuing benefits for future generations. The role that CANDO plays in this process is crucial. A long struggle faces many groups as they strive towards attaining the goal of self-sufficiency and economic independence, and CANDO provides a tool to make that happen.

In the past, we have seen time and time again how larger Canadian society had failed our people and often served only to guarantee and generate a widespread welfare culture. Economic development and commercial activities were frowned upon by the institutions that were put in place to control us, and breaking these bonds is the challenge before us in the future. This situation was compounded by the pervasive problems of racism, remoteness, the lack of adequate infrastructure to support business and generate jobs, and the serious lack of adequate training and relevant education.

It is also true that we must deal with a fundamental skepticism from non-Natives about the need to preserve and protect our culture, and the impacts upon the traditional ways of life of our people.

The Challenge

The challenge before us today is one that is different and more serious than that in the past. The reason for this lies in our communities, where we have a tidal wave of young people ready to come onto the job market.

They are, for the most part, better educated in the ways of the outside world than any other generation, and there is a fundamental challenge before us to make sure that their potential and their opportunities are protected and enhanced. We have the highest population growth in the country, and as leaders and as those in authority, we must ensure that there are doors open for these people to take their rightful place in the world of the future.

That world will be one of two standards for them. The traditions and culture of our people must always be protected and sustained, but we must look to the world around us and realize that the business world is where there are opportunities to address now.

We must also know that the success or failure in this endeavour falls on our shoulders, and that our young people and our fledgling businesspeople need us to understand and support them.

The Vision

Part of this move into the area of commercial and business affairs is based upon a vision that we must create for ourselves. That vision is the result of us looking into our communities, our resources, and our assets, and see where this can take us. This is the approach of strategic and master planning as the basis for moving forward.

This is a terminology that may be new and perhaps even unwelcome for some, but we must recognize it and address the need. Without a plan upon which to base our efforts, there will be problems.

The strategic plan is nothing more than what we think about on a day-to-day basis, but putting it in words and setting out goals and attainable objectives. What is produced is a road map for where we are going in the future. Opportunities and strengths are defined and imagination is awakened by what results.

It is an exercise that is often difficult, but the benefits it brings back are substantial. We know, at the end of the exercise, how all of the different parts of our community fit together, and how one can support another in moving forward. It also makes very clear what the business and commercial opportunities are.

It is also the tool that must be used to access the ears of government and to play the game the way others do. The development of our communities and the economic opportunities that exist are based on this plan, and with it I can meet with government and business leaders and plan projects for the future. No more going forth with an initiative that doesn't fit into a strategic approach.

This is a discipline that is important to learn and to absorb, and is a training and educational tool that we must adopt and use for our benefit.

Politics and Business

How do we realize that vision and that plan? The one thing we do *not* do is to make the mistake of mixing business and politics.

The two were at one time one and the same, and there were no community commercial ventures that went anywhere without the involvement and direction of the political authorities. The problem is that political bodies are, by their nature, inappropriate for this type of activity. Look around us at the federal and provincial governments, and it would be hard to find success stories in the business world in which they have been involved.

The situation may not be far different for us. I have recognized that there is a somewhat different situation in our communities in that politics and the community leadership have a larger role to play. The message, however, is that the role must simply be one of support—not one of taking the project and running with it.

We must develop the initiative and self-confidence that holds back Native entrepreneurs from going out and making successes of themselves. They cannot go forward with these projects and put their time, money, and future at stake if they feel that the political authorities will come in and take over at any time. This is a Damocles sword that they do not need, and we should realize how much of a negative impact this has on them. That is especially the case today, when the business world needs the type of commitment that is based on a special commercial spirit, the need to take rapid and immediate decisions and not be involved in a prolonged political process.

If there is a message to give to you on this, it is clear: keep the politicians away. The politicians should stay away from the business projects. It is time to get business and economic development out of band offices and into the hands of the business private sector of our community. The decision has to be made.

The role of the political bodies is to smooth the way so that our people are trained, have access to resources—financial, human, and other—to allow them to be a success, and to make sure that there are no roadblocks to stop them. The moment we cross that line and take the projects away from them, the sense of ownership and responsibility is gone and the projects are doomed to failure

The Waskaganish Tourism Example

In my own community, I saw this very clearly.

Tourism is a major opportunity before us, and the band spent countless dollars training, building a splendid lodge, and then trying to get this industry going. All of this, however, was not as important as the local individual who finally stood up and said that he would set up his own business and care for tourists coming into the community.

If we had discouraged him, no one would have followed. But we did the opposite. And that example has been followed by others, and the private sector in Waskaganish will lead the development of this industry. The politicians will stay where they should, in the background, supporting the project—and perhaps taking credit for the success politically, at election time!

Education: An Essential Tool

Another important area that I want to address as well is the area of education and training.

I had the pleasure, a number of years ago, of sitting on a committee of Native businessmen and others dealing with the issue of senior Native business-management training. We sat around the table, put the speechmaking to the side, and came out with an honest and accurate report about this essential need—training for the Native businessperson. Our report, *For the Benefit of All*, was referred to in the Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Affairs.

We were very much aware that the whole area of training Native people had become a booming industry, often without great concern about either what was actually being taught and even the results. We strongly suggested at that time that standards be set that our young people would get the equivalent, if not superior, culturally relevant business education.

Many of us had seen the efforts to get Native people to replace others in your businesses, local governments, and institutions such as school boards and health boards, but without the appropriate qualifications and training, a disservice was being done to all. We did not get the trained employees we needed. Those who were hired soon felt that they were indeed not qualified, and they lost their self-esteem and self-confidence, and nothing was accomplished.

What I see as the goal is to have competent, trained, and productive Native people in

place throughout not only our own world, but throughout Canadian society.

This will never happen until we say to ourselves that our children deserve the very best education and meet standards and goals that once again are not only equivalent, but are superior to those we see around us.

This is where the CANDOs of the world have a great influence, and they should continue with this work. We will never be able to persevere in a new business climate unless our young people and businessmen and women can compete equally.

Let us include cultural factors that are especially relevant to them. But do not accept anything but the best for our people. Anything less would be a shame for us all.

Summary

I have come to you today with a message of congratulations for CANDO, and some practical

and direct advice on two very important issues. Despite the best efforts of CANDO, if the two matters which I brought forward are ignored, its efforts will become much more difficult to attain, and we may all be losers.

Firstly, let us keep business and politics apart. Let our political leaders and institutions support the commercial side when it is necessary, but let the potential of accomplishment and drive of the young and of businesspeople be allowed to grow and prosper.

Secondly, do not let the educational and training bodies off the hook. Continually raise the standards for our people, and ensure that the training that they get is second to none, and even superior to them all.

If we all work together with these goals, and support CANDO and its efforts, there will be only one result: success. And it will be accomplished in a very special way—for the benefit of all!

Thank you. *Meegwetch.*