

First Nations Key to Future

Written by Ray Gerow

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Are Aboriginal people not part of the northern B.C. economic future?

I know the answer to this question and I am sure most of the people who are reading this know it as well. Having said that, I have to wonder how you can hold an event like Tuesday night's Crystal Ball forum, gazing into the future of the economy in northern B.C., without having any Aboriginal representation on its panel of experts.

I don't want to take anything away from the presenters. I know the majority of them quite well and hold most of them in high esteem, but every one of them should have asked the question of the organizers - "Does the panel reflect the diversity of our population, or better yet, does the panel reflect the reality of our future?"

At one time I used to view this type of oversight as just that, an unintentional oversight on the part of organizers. But given the state of our economy and the cold, hard fact that the economy in this part of our country is not going to substantially recover without meaningful Aboriginal participation, pleading ignorance to the need for Aboriginal inclusion is no longer acceptable. Everyone needs to be involved in our future economy, and everyone needs to take responsibility for this type of oversight - organizers, presenters and sponsors.

Almost every business person I talk to acknowledges that we need to make meaningful changes to the way we do business, but what seems to be missing is the understanding that change begins with the individual, not with the collective. My challenge to those on the panel, to those organizing this event, to those attending this event, is to get out of your comfort level, push your boundaries, make sure you are engaging the entire community in your conversations. If you want to effect change, you can't do it without involving different people.

Ignoring Aboriginal inclusion is also ignoring the current economic reality. Our region and our city have taken positive steps to get us out of this recession, and the biggest danger of not hearing the Aboriginal voice is that we are missing a big part of what would otherwise make an economic forecast relevant. If you want a forecast on how a hockey game is going to turn out, you try to talk to every truly influential player, or you cannot expect to get a very good picture of how the game will play out.

Our provincial government, whether you agree with its approach or not, has at least recognized the need to reach some form of meaningful recognition and accommodation of the rights and title of Aboriginal people, but without substantial Aboriginal engagement at all levels of our society, their attempts are going to be futile. If we leave it up to our elected leaders to get it done, our future generations will be looking back at us wondering what we were thinking. Federal, provincial and municipal governments spend a lot of time and energy on so called "engagement and/or accommodation," but in my view this is mostly all smoke and mirrors.

Creating truly meaningful partnerships and relationships is, of course, not made of one-time

legislated consultations; it is built through constant and ongoing activity - one that will bear fruit as we move together in community and economic development. As I said, we all have a responsibility in this, and building such relationships is a task for individuals, businesses, industries, groups and organizations. It's not someone else's job.

When I talk about elected leaders, I am also including our Aboriginal leadership, both elected and those of us who lead our organizations. We can no longer sit back and wait for things to happen, and we can't afford to blame the past for why we are not moving forward. We can no longer ignore the need to work together, to form partnerships, and in saying this I do not mean signing another MOU, I mean real working partnerships. We all need to take responsibility for where we are at, and if we recognize that Aboriginal people are a source of opportunity and competitive advantage for the economy in northern B.C., we would move ourselves into a better and brighter future. This takes deliberate policies and strategies, it takes hard work and it takes new attitudes that will allow us to move to a place of collaboration and understanding.

If our economy is going to come out of this recession stronger and better, true relationships need to be forged, and they need to be at the community level, and that means we all have to take responsibility for ensuring this happens. Governments cannot solve our problems for us. The necessary changes can only happen at the community level. These types of changes take trust. Trust is at the heart of all relationships. Dialogue builds trust. Dialogue cannot happen if the conversation is one-sided, and not involving Aboriginal people in your dialogue sends the signal that you do not trust us; that you do not really want things to change.

Northern B.C. has many opportunities to be able to foster economic growth, but in order to realize on them, we all need to come together to form solid relationships. If all you want is for our economy to recover so we can go back to the same old, same old, then I guess you are doing the right thing, but if you want to ensure that the new economy emerges stronger and better, let's make sure that we do not leave anyone behind this time. It is OK to make mistakes, but to not learn from them and to blindly keep going in the wrong direction when you already know what lies ahead is inexcusable.

If you live to be 100, will you be able to look your great-great-grandchildren in the eye and proudly say you did the right thing, you learned from past mistakes, and you personally made a difference in society?

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