

The Great Gitksan Debate

THE GITKSAN HEREDITARY CHIEFS (GHC) WANT TO BE FREE TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY. AND THE GITKSAN PEOPLE WANT TO BE TREATED JUST LIKE ALL OTHER CANADIAN CITIZENS.

Fighting the myriad issues that stem from problems such as substance abuse, unemployment and youth suicide, the GHC is breaking ground and stereotypes by asking the Canadian government to end their reliance on the Indian Act.

Elmer Derrick, chief negotiator for the GHC, said he believes his people would have a higher quality of life if they were treated as regular Canadians.

"People are on their hands and knees; that's what the Crown policies have done to our people," he told *The Globe and Mail*. "The status quo is not working and it has to change."

In negotiations with the government since 1994, the Gitksan wish to step back from what has gone before and open a new and more productive initiative.

Governments have long said that settlements must respect local conditions and traditions. The Gitksan agree, and in that spirit propose a specific approach to their future relationship with the governments of Canada and B.C.

As Art Wilson, communications officer for the w explains, the sole purpose of Gitksan governance is internal for the management of collective Gitksan assets.

"Our current governance system demonstrably does this adequately now and has since time immemorial. If there is still a wish for a significant added aspect of democracy to the governance model, we would be prepared to discuss the addition of an elected group of

Totem poles are a proud part of Gitksan history and can be seen throughout Gitksan territory.



ABOVE: Gitksan of all ages gather to celebrate Aboriginal Day.

observers over our traditional government of Hereditary Chiefs, with rights to full information and a right of veto under certain circumstances. Gitksan law already makes provision for the replacement of unsatisfactory Chiefs.

Our claim, and our only distinct claim, is to the inherited collective rights of our ancestors including those confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Delgamuukw*.

All Canadians have the right to inherit property. So do we. Our inheritance is an interest in the lands making up our traditional territories. That interest entitles us to a shared decision making in the development of that territory and a share of the wealth it generates, as well as fair treatment by governments in all matters. The detail of this is what we wish to negotiate.

My opinion is that we discard the options that have not worked. Do we want to forever operate on the reserves? Do we want the land selection model? If you think we are in a strong enough position without a treaty, what problems does that pose?

In the mid 1970s, Peter Williams, a Gitksan self-made lawyer, looked at our situation. He said our people were hardly recognizable and were beaten down. The Alternate Governance model in my eyes is realizing the dreams of Peter Williams when they said, 'one day we'll be free to be Gitksan.'

The Gitksan governance system has evolved over many centuries. Our civilized approach to taking care of our community has not simply come out of a piece of legislation. The *Ayookw* (or the laws) that guide the Gitksan people have a solid foundation of fairness, honour, respect, truth, openness, inclusiveness, accountability and responsibility. The underlying principle of democracy as espoused by JS Mill, Aristotle, Plato, Machiavelli and others from across the pond is the same as what *Delgamuukw*, *Guxsan*, *Sakumhiigookw*, *Dinimget*, *Gitludaalth*, and many other Gitksan thinkers defend."

For information on the Gitksan Model of Self Governance, go to www.gitksan.com.



ABOVE: It takes many hands to raise a totem pole designed by world-renowned carver, Earl Muldoe.



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