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Seizing High Ground

As grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Matthew Coon Come is giving his people hope

In many ways the position of grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations has been akin to being Governor General of Canada: you get a lot of attention but you don't have a lot of authority.

As Matthew Coon Come now tackles the job he is altering the dynamics, not willing to be the 'politician' that predecessors like Ovide Mercredi and Phil Fontaine became. Instead, he is a loud voice for native rights. Not strident, Mr. Coon Come couches his beliefs diplomatically, though he leaves little doubt about how it is time for natives to assert themselves.

In Prince George this week, he met with the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council and lent his support to the band in their attempts to kickstart treaty talks and, at the very minimum, sign an interim measures agreement.

"It is of no surprise to me that there is a continued insistence by the federal and provincial governments to exclude First Nations from their share of wealth in this country.

"As I was sitting here this morning with the Carrier-Sekani Nation I heard of developments that are taking place. The exclusion of First Nation from their share of the resources has an impact on our ability to deal with high levels of poverty, the high levels of suicide in our community. It is a perpetuation of the status quo and it is totally unacceptable."

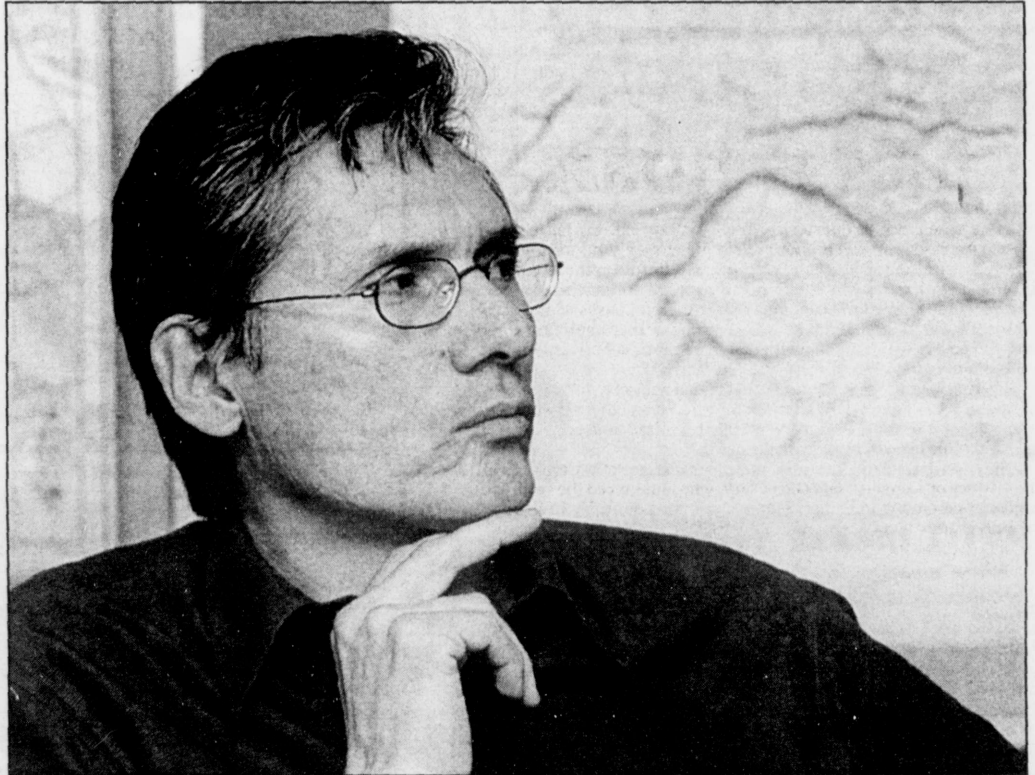
According to Mr. Coon Come, there is a simple way around this impasse — and he was speaking not only of the stalled Carrier talks but treaty negotiations across the province.

"There needs to be respect for the fundamental standard of the international community that Canada has adopted and to respect our rights as First Nations peoples. The federal government and the provincial government need to follow the advice of the Supreme Court of Canada and respect the fiduciary relationship with the First Nations people.

"I think you have to stop asking that when development takes place for the Indians to move over, as if we are in the way, as if alienating us will solve development problems, that putting us on land that nobody wants with no economic value and excluding us from economic participation will solve problems."

And in what is a major sticking point for many non-aboriginals, Mr. Coon Come was quite clear on the need for natives to be in control of the resources on band land.

"I think there has to be a respect for the right of our people to regulate and control the development in our own territory. It is the people who are off the land that, that are tied to the land,



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that understand the affects of development on the land.

"But there has to be a respect for First Nations people to decide the best use of their territory."

He argues natives are in a far better position to protect the habitat and environment.

And he also argues that native developers should be able to access some of the same kinds of monies that non-native developers do.

However, Mr. Coon Come is quick to add that he is not against development. "We do not object to economic integration on equitable terms, but we have a problem with being integrated into a society with no respect for our culture and the need to preserve our way of life.

"I think the attitude of us and them is unacceptable. With the non-native, the us, saying they have to carry the burden for natives, the them. I think there is intertwining of aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in stimulating the economy within our areas."

One of the most contentious issues, according to Mr. Coon Come, is the insistence of government that they will not negotiate while a band may seek redress through the courts. That's the situation the Carrier Sekani found themselves in after the Saik'uz filed suit.

"I think it has to be said, going back to litigation and negotiation, that it has to be said this is a form of discrimination, that is completely unacceptable in this century."

He asserts that any business, in any jurisdiction in Canada, can negotiate a settlement with the federal and provincial governments right up to the courthouse steps. "This is a double-standard," he says.

But when it comes to whether he supports bands who take matters into their own hands, Mr. Coon Come makes it clear that frustration is growing on reserves across Canada.

"If there is a continuation of First Nation exclusion from their share of the wealth in this country, because we want to be able feed our families, have a roof over their heads and establish our own political institutions, so we don't have to depend on the federal government and we don't have to depend on handouts.

"We have used every avenue available to us... but why do we have to do that. Why can't the federal government respect Supreme Court decisions here in this country.

"If there is a continuation of exclusion, we may find ourselves going down avenues we don't want to."