

MARTIN DREAMS OF CHANGE FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH

Gordon Hoekstra
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As a young man, former prime minister Paul Martin took a job on a tugboat on the Mackenzie River, moving between Hay River, N.W.T., and the Beaufort Sea.

Most of the other young men he came to know during the summer were First Nations, Métis or Inuit. He learned they were not as excited about their future prospects as he was. He tried to keep in touch, and while some made out OK, others fell into substance abuse and two committed suicide.

At a keynote address to the B.C. Natural Resource Forum on Wednesday in Prince George, Martin said 50 years later, the prospects of aboriginal youth have improved, but not enough.

“I believe as strong as I can we hold it within our capacity to ensure that the next generation of aboriginal Canadians is the generation of real and positive change,” Martin told an audience of 300 or so at the Civic Centre.

“[It would be] the generation that stays in school, the generation that’s given the tools to succeed, the generation that breaks the cycle of poverty, that generation that builds the great companies, the generation that makes discoveries in science, the generation that writes the great music and paints the great paintings,” he said to a standing ovation.

Martin pointed to the statistics.

The high-school drop-out rate for aboriginal students on-reserve is 60 per cent, and 43 per cent off-reserve. That compares to 9.5 per cent of non-aboriginal Canadians who drop out of high school.

Without that high school education, the employment prospects for aboriginal youth are dim, he said.

Only seven per cent of First Nations attain university degrees. That number is nine per cent for Métis and four per cent for Inuit. That compares to 23 per cent of non-aboriginal Canadians.

Martin argued not only is there a moral imperative to correct this inequity, it makes business sense.

He pointed to the fact that First Nations youth are the largest potential source for new entrants in the work force to replace baby boomers.

Not to improve the education of aboriginals is dumb, he said, “dumber than a bag of hammers.”

It’s why Martin now heads up the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, that has spearheaded a number of programs, as well as joining with his son David Martin to create the \$50-million Capital for Aboriginal Prosperity and Entrepreneurship Fund.

The capital fund helps support aboriginal businesses, while the education initiative is meant to improve the state of schools, promote mentoring and best practices, particularly for remote schools. It also includes an aboriginal-g geared business program that has been implemented in seven schools including at Charles Hays in Prince Rupert in northern British Columbia.

Each student is mentored by established business people, including aboriginal business owners.

The program is designed to improve students' proficiency in business mathematics, English, accounting, marketing, and information and communications technology.

Martin said he would like to see the business program implemented in all schools with a high proportion of aboriginal students.