

Harper Cons Display Colonial Attitude toward Northerners

The friendship center in La Ronge laid off its youth recreation staff last summer. After the cutback was announced nationally, I wrote a letter to our local weekly newspaper pointing out the benefits of a targeted youth recreation program. Even though this letter did not explicitly mention the Conservative Party, it received a lengthy response from the local Member of Parliament who argued that there was no cutback because the money would still be available for other as yet undefined uses. I was subsequently removed from the Kikinahk Board of Directors.

In a democracy elected boards must be accountable to their communities and that accountability rests on a foundation of information sharing. One way colonialism disempowers communities is by granting "inside" knowledge to elites who then become dependent on the colonizers for their status. In this way Indian agents, who at one time controlled travel and economic activity on reserves, were able to manipulate generations of chiefs and counsellors. By manipulating public discourse using the leverage of government funding the Harper government is similarly separating organizations from their communities.

At a special board meeting called to discuss the issue, Kikinahk board members expressed the fear that to vary from the message scripted by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada would endanger future funding. We were told that even disagreeing with the Harper line as an individual could endanger future funding. One board member described the federal government as "fascist." Kikinahk's executive director, a Conservative Party supporter, said the government's efforts at control "bothered" him. He subsequently published an article in our weekly newspaper lauding the federal government for announcing a program before the terms and conditions were even announced.

Control of community organizations to further the political agenda of a political party happens when the community board is separated from the community it is meant to serve. Although there is a large community of aboriginal people in the La Ronge area, they are not ordinarily invited to become members of their friendship center. Should a community member show up at an annual meeting that person must wait a year before he or she is allowed to run for the board; yet, existing board members can fill vacancies by appointing people who are not members. Since the 20 to 40 people who ordinarily show up of Annual General Meetings are mostly staff members and their families who themselves are not allowed to run for the board, there are rarely contested elections.

When an elected board becomes institutionally separated from its community the effect on the community is disempowerment. While grateful for whatever services happen to be available, community members become dependants as opposed to owners of the services. The pioneering government of Allan Blakeney took a different approach.

The mandate of the 1970s Human Resources Development Agency was to help groups of aboriginal, elderly, disabled, and other disadvantaged minorities identify their needs and plan strategies for meeting those needs. One possible strategy was to apply for funding from other sources, but the priorities were identified first by the communities. An empowered Kikinahk would have involved the community in discussing the cutback and finding alternative means for

meeting the need for youth recreation. Disempowered communities wait for the bureaucrats to decide what their needs are with their elected boards then selling those ideas to the community.

Governments adopting a community development strategy must display maturity in accepting diversity in thinking while maintaining a respectful dialogue with empowered groups. As this example demonstrates, this federal government lacks this level of maturity and is instead exhibiting a neo-colonial attitude towards groups receiving federal funds.