

CANADA'S ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE: A PROFILE OF DEHCHO FIRST NATIONS INTERIM GRAND CHIEF, GERALD ANTOINE

FORT SIMPSON, NT -- (special) -- The newly selected Interim Grand Chief of the Dehcho First Nations (DFN) has no illusions about the problems and divisions he and his people face in the next few months, leading up to a summer General Assembly and an elected person to lead the on-going struggle with Canada for their indigenous rights.

“This is not about me, I am merely a person chosen to be a protector, a facilitator, an engineer if you like, who has been honoured by the confidence of his people to help prepare them for next assembly in June,” says Gerald (Jerry) Antoine, the 53-year-old Dehcho broadcaster who was chosen late last week to serve as interim Grand Chief of the DFN.

He knows what he is faced with. He sat through the long, agonizing and painful Special Assembly in late January that dismissed Herb Norwegian, who is a friend and cousin. Antoine was one of the few who came and stood beside Norwegian in the last minutes of the Special Assembly in an act of solidarity for the former grand chief's long history of work with the Dehcho and the Dene Nation.

Antoine had been there already. He was the first Grand Chief of the DFN from 1993-96, moving it from a regional tribal council of the Dene Nation (Mackenzie-Liard region) to its people's own identity as Dehcho.

“Sure, I know about the divisions we face, I know about the terrible legacy of the residential schools on people, I was there. Abuse has been the way Canada has treated First Nations since the beginning. It is still an abusive relationship. They still refuse to implement their Treaty obligations, they still want us to relinquish every Treaty right that our elders understood and only negotiate for the scraps that are left over.”

Passionate and articulate in his Dene language and in English, Antoine talks straight about the “shame Canadians would feel if they really knew what their government has done to abuse Indigenous peoples.

“Last year on September 13, 2007, Canada voted against the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples. It was an act of abuse, an act of shame that few other countries agreed with. It shows how Canada still regards First Nations and deals with us in a colonial manner.”

With comprehensive land claims negotiations continuing next week in Hay River, Canada’s negotiators may have hoped for a Dehcho leader who might be more amenable to Canada’s position. Not likely.

Antoine is clear that the problems -- and they are many -- lie with Canada, not the Chiefs and Elders and Youth and Women who make up the Dehcho First Nations.

“Sure, we have many problems. We need healing from these abuses, we need reconciliation amongst ourselves, we need to be united, participatory, involved and informed. It is the duty of every elected leader to inform their people so that decisions can be made collectively.”

He pledged that for the next five months or so until a Grand Chief is elected at the summer assembly, he would be in every community “with the permission of the chief and council and the Metis leaders to help prepare for the most important Assembly in our recent history.”

Antoine is well aware that abuse is a loaded word in the Dehcho since it stood on the principle of “zero tolerance” to violence that led to Norwegian’s almost unanimous dismissal, requiring a person of stature, integrity and spirituality to replace him on an interim basis. Antoine did not seek the job. The DFN executive also considered three other leaders on Feb. 8 by teleconference call.

The new Interim Grand Chief fully supports “zero tolerance” to violence and abuse and wants it applied at all levels from children through families, communities and at the First Nation level. But he also wants Canadians to understand that political and government policy abuse has been the predominant relationship with Canada and its colonial offspring, the Territorial Administration.

The “other side” (the two levels of government involved in the land claims negotiations with the Dehcho) will not find a weakened DFN. Hurting, yes, and in need of healing, yes, but not weakened in their resolve to implement the Crown-First Nation Relationship.

“The other things, we will take care of ourselves. We will take care of our families which are so important to our culture. I will encourage them to be involved fully in the Dehcho Process every step of the way. We will do all that in an ethical and professional way. It will be healthy for us and we will be that way.”

But, he is also clear about where the problems lie. “Canada is the problem. They made, and continue to make, the relationship abusive. Land claims and so-called modern treaties are designed to continue the abuse. Our Special Assembly voted in favour of zero tolerance and that means not just for individuals but also abuse from governments, from Canada.”

Antoine has lived in Liidlii Kue much of his life but attended schools in smaller communities like Nahanni Butte and Jean Marie River before being swept into the residential school system run by the Federal government and major Canadian churches. He attended LaPointe Hall (Roman Catholic) at Fort Simpson and Akaitcho Hall in Yellowknife.

After graduating from high school, Antoine was granted a scholarship to attend the prestigious Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific for two years from 1974-76. He graduated from Pearson College, located near Victoria, B.C., from the International Baccalaureate program which

gives him a wider global and international perspective which he brings, along with a deep and influential indigenous spirituality, to the service of his people.

He spent a number of years following, travelling to the UN to work on drafting the Declaration on Indigenous Peoples which Canada so cavalierly rejected last year.

Antoine has long been involved with the Native Communications Society of the NWT, with studios and offices in Yellowknife, especially in radio where he has been an announcer, host and broadcaster, at CKLB and “The Voice of Denendeh” on 101.9 fm.

With his family, he has lived in recent years in Yellowknife, hosting programs such as “Denendeh in the Afternoon” and “Denendeh in the Morning”. He also takes his program around the Mackenzie Valley covering local and regional assemblies and issues and broadcasting them live.

As interim Grand Chief, he is on a leave-of-absence until the summer assembly, “shifting to the other side of the microphone.”

Family and spirituality seem to be two key anchors in interim Grand Chief Antoine’s life that keep him in close touch with his people and especially with the elders, the *Naxehcho* as they are known in the Dehcho language.

“You see, in our way we cannot separate spirituality from people, from the land, from the creation. It is all a part of our lives and when it gets separated we are incomplete, we are not living our lives as Dene and we cannot heal what we have just been through without it. It is the *Naxehcho* who guide us in this, they advise and direct us on development for example. They play the lead role in our spiritual direction.”

That is why Canada, Antoine insists, must come to the table in a

“respectful” way to fulfill the country’s obligations under the Treaties and not insist on relinquishing rights and privileges that the elders know about and endorse. “That is not acceptable and Canada and Canadians should be ashamed.”

Antoine’s family have already held two personal meetings about their role of support in this critical period. He has made plans to visit all 10 of the Dehcho communities, as well as Dehcho living in Yellowknife, and Metis locals within the next three weeks and then report his findings to the Dehcho leadership.

His family is important to that period of demanding travel and meetings. “I have a healthy family, some pursuing education, some careers but we are a close and supportive family so it will be all right and I would never have agreed to this without their backing and support.”

A last word:

“The success of all we do depends on the leadership informing their people about what they know and listening to their people about what they want. The DFN is only a delivery system which can encourage people to be involved. Unity comes from the leaders, elders and grandmothers as well as the youth, it means working to be of one mind. That’s how I’m going to approach this next period.”

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