



# Eagle Spirit Energy Holding Ltd.



**FRONTIER CENTRE**  
**FOR PUBLIC POLICY**  
Profile Series

*Profile of:*  
**CALVIN HELIN**

***" ... if they want power over their lives they must have economic control over their income."***

Calvin Helin, 58, Indigenous lawyer, best-selling author, and business leader, says the real battle of First Nations is in convincing Indigenous peoples to understand that if they want power over their lives they must have economic control over their income.

“We can play the capitalist game on our terms that includes looking after the environment and looking out for the well-being of our people,” he said.

Although Helin is probably best known for his seven times best-selling book, *Dances with Dependency: Out of Poverty through Self-Reliance* (an incredibly influential book that looked at the causes of Indigenous poverty in Canada and proposed ways to promote economic development) and his second award-winning book *The Economic Dependency Trap: Breaking Free to Self-Reliance*, he has more recently been involved in a major effort to get Indigenous peoples into oil and gas development in a big way.

According to Helin, most First Nation people are located on remote reserves where there is little or no employment and many band members subsist in dire poverty living off social assistance. Indigenous communities need to develop economic opportunities to improve conditions.

Calvin is chairman and president of Eagle Spirit Energy Holdings, Ltd., a First Nations-led company looking to build an energy corridor through northern B.C. and Alberta. The \$16 billion Eagle Spirit oil pipeline would be about the same size as the Energy East project cancelled last month by TransCanada. The Eagle Spirit pipeline was proposed as an alternative to Northern Gateway, a project opposed by First Nations in the region for not providing enough environmental protections for their

communities.

The proposed pipeline generated Indigenous support because it was innovative in its protection of the environment in Indigenous territories by dividing the areas of the pipelines in zones that different Indigenous groups were responsible for protecting. Helin said he had to work on overcoming suspicions from within Indigenous communities. Communities, he said, had to be shown that the structure really left them in control.

Helin is no stranger to reconciling critical business interests with strong Indigenous values, especially a concern for the natural environment. Helin is a member of the Tsimshian Nation and comes from the community of Lax Kw'alaams on the Northwest coast of British Columbia. He is the son of a hereditary chief and grew up within a hard-working family. He is former President of the Native Investment and Trade Association and held directorships on the Vancouver Board of Trade (where he chaired the newly formed Aboriginal Opportunities Committee), GeoScience BC, and the Canada-China Resource Development Foundation.

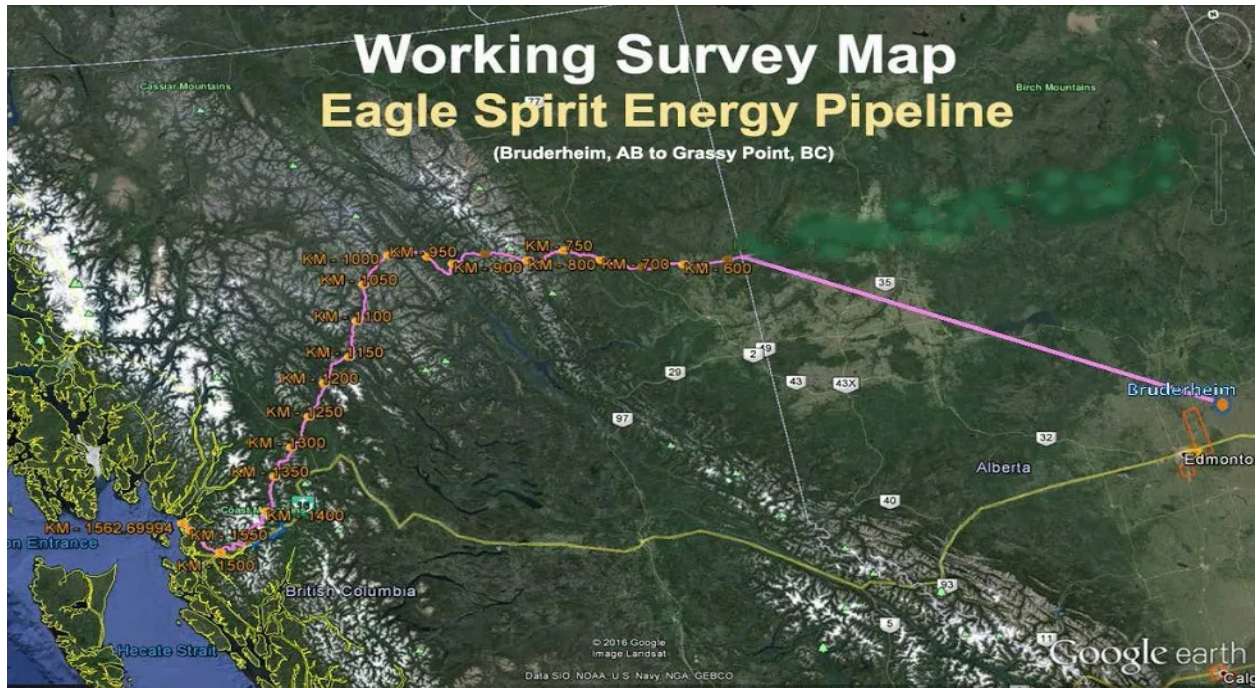
“I initially got involved in business because I could clearly see that the economic dependency purposely created by government policy was killing our population and the only route to freedom was to generate own-source revenues.”

The Eagle Spirit pipeline project started when Helin was approached by the Aqulini family of Vancouver. The family met with his family and they collectively agreed that the only way to bring benefits to First Nation communities and to have control over the environmental model was if First Nations led the project. Helin said it has taken five years to solidify the model.

"We spent the first year listening to First Nations concerns which were environmental first and equity second. We then hired the top experts in the oil industry in the world and built a world class environmental model which we took back to the communities. Our First Nations felt very comfortable with this and voted at their first meeting to endorse an energy corridor," he said.

On the Eagle Spirit pipeline project, Helin said they had to contend with ENGOs who had infiltrated the communities and had local people secretly on their payroll opposing all efforts at development.

Helin said that these ENGOs manipulate First Nations because their constitutional rights to be consulted and accommodated (as interpreted by the



He then subsequently came up with the first-of-its-kind "chiefs council" as a vehicle for how the leaders of all communities engaged with all projects and enabled all the Indigenous communities to provide their environmental input.

The major obstacle, he said, to First Nation involvement and success in resource development are non-Aboriginal environmentalist groups.

"Often ENGOs (environmental non-governmental organizations) bamboozle local people to stop all development by exaggerating environmental impacts and using First Nations people as props in their media drive," he said angrily.

Supreme Court of Canada) give them the leverage to stop or green light certain major natural resource development projects.

"ENGOs make their money off of stopping all development and they have no consideration for the wellbeing of communities, that most communities have 90% or greater unemployment."

For resource development – and especially in the oil and gas sector – he said there are specific barriers and obstacles that are keeping First Nations from tapping into these industries. He pointed out that court rulings affirming the government obligation to "consult and accommodate" First Nations have given

Indigenous communities incredible leverage over resource activity on their traditional lands. The clear record of court rulings over the last few decades has been solidly in favour of Indigenous parties.

One major obstacle to First Nation business activity is a lack of understanding of the business that can lead to unrealistic expectations. For instance, First Nations need to think about how to earn cash as opposed to just getting cash as federal government transfer payments. Some other major common obstacles are the lack of access to capital because of land ownership and Indian Act restrictions and a definite need to separate band politics from business. On the corporate side, he said the problem is some corporations don't do their due diligence on communities and come in with all the decisions made and no real consultation with the communities involved. Moreover, some corporations view them as simply a burden on a deal and are not prepared to listen, work to earn trust.

Helin looks to the example of the Indigenous people of Alaska as a successful model for resource development.

"The Indigenous people of Alaska—13 Native regional and 225 village corporations—are an example of how natural resource development can be harnessed on their terms to raise the living standards of tribal people and become major power players in the \$50 billion-plus GDP state economy," he said.

The Alaska Native corporations, he said, own 44 million acres of selected lands throughout the state. This makes them the largest landowners and the biggest players in the natural resource industry. Indigenous partnerships with resource companies has fulfilled the

community goals of offsetting the high amount of seasonal jobs, unemployment and social assistance dependency that was characterizing these communities.

Helin said that Alaska Business Magazine reported that, "The success of Alaska Native companies is due in part to a host of multi-faceted factors in-



cluding exceptional leadership, evolving business models, shareholder-focused missions, and continuous diversification."

Though they are engaged in the development of natural resources, Indigenous Alaskans are now diversifying their operations into other business ventures both inside and outside the state.

In the United States, Helin has found that Native American communities are realizing the value of resource development. Natural resources found on Native American lands are critical to the development of the resource industries and the Native American communities. He quoted a 2011 report in Native American Lands and Natural Resource Development where one academic noted: "If mining has been crucial to national growth, tribal mineral resources have been crucial to the mining industry."

Likewise, First Nations in Canada need to tap into similar resource potential on their lands.

Creating an entrepreneurial culture within Indigenous communities, he said, has its challenges. Individual entrepreneurs on reserve need to get proper education and overcome community jealousies over success (the so-called “crab syndrome” on First Nations where individuals are pulled down if they are individually successful by other community members). Individuals need to understand entrepreneurship requires risk taking as well. Fear of the unknown needs to be challenged head on. “They need to understand that the only way to get out of the dependency trap is to take ownership of your life and problems and embrace new knowledge that can make a difference,” he said.

For governments to help spur entrepreneurship on reserves, it needs to “get out of the way.” It needs to cut regulations and allow First Nations to leverage their

lands for collateral. Finally, and most importantly, the governments at all levels need to recognize and assist individual entrepreneurship, rather than just focus on communities in business.

Helin offered some sufficient advice for other Indigenous entrepreneurs that he said came from their ancestors: “Be open-minded, be ready to continuously learn and adapt, and when you have success don’t forget to give back.”



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Joseph Quesnel is a research fellow for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy who mainly focuses on Aboriginal matters and property rights. Presently based in eastern Nova Scotia, he is from north-eastern Ontario and has Métis ancestry from Quebec.

He graduated from McGill University in 2001, where he majored in political science and history. He specialized in Canadian and U.S. politics, with an emphasis on constitutional law. He also has a Master of Journalism degree from Carleton University, where he specialized in political reporting. His master's research project focused on reformist Indigenous thinkers in Canada.

He is currently studying theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax.

In the past while as a policy analyst, he was the lead researcher on the Frontier Centre's flagship Aboriginal Governance Index, which is measured perceptions of quality of governance and services on Prairie First Nations.

For over two years, he covered House standing committees as well as Senate committees. Quesnel's career in journalism includes several stints at community newspapers in Northern Ontario, including in Sudbury and Espanola. He also completed a radio broadcasting internship at CFRA 580 AM, a talk radio station in Ottawa, and the well-known Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC).

He is a past editor of C2C Journal, an online Canadian publication devoted to political commentary. He wrote a weekly column for the Winnipeg Sun and contributes to The Taxpayer, the flagship publication of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Quesnel's policy commentaries have appeared all over Canada, including the Globe and Mail, the National Post, the Financial Post, the Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, the Montreal Gazette, the Calgary Herald, Winnipeg Free Press, among many other major papers. Over the years, he has been featured as a guest commentator on many radio and television news programs.