

Fontaine leaves AFN with strong foundation

Friday, July 10, 2009

Chiefs from across Canada will gather in Calgary from July 21 to July 23 to elect a new national chief for the Assembly of First Nations.

The task of replacing the incumbent, Phil Fontaine, will be a historic event and the new chief will have huge shoes to fill.

Fontaine has been the national chief for three terms -- first in 1997, when he succeeded Ovide Mercredi, in 2003, when he replaced Mathew Coon Come, and 2006, when he was acclaimed for a third term.

Fontaine's term in office has been historic, including the negotiation of the Kelowna Accord, the residential school settlement, and the apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as well as the subsequent trip to Rome and the visit with the Pope. Fontaine also managed to weather the change of government after having a close relationship with the previous Liberal government.

The failure of the Harper government to follow through with the Kelowna Accord was outside his control, but nevertheless its loss remains his greatest regret.

It is unusual for First Nations leaders to leave office with their dignity intact. The rough and tumble world of politics leaves leaders burned out and ravaged by opponents, from within and without. First Nations politics can be compared with bull riding. There is no proper way to get off, and the beast is liable to turn on you. Fontaine will walk away from the position of national chief with his reputation whole and his place in history assured.

Politics is in his blood. He was born in 1944 and raised on the Fort Alexander First Nation in Manitoba. Later the band would take the name Sagkeeng First Nation. His mother, Agnes Fontaine, was elected to the band council in 1952 -- the first woman elected to a band council in Canada.

I first met Phil Fontaine in the late 1960s and early '70s, when he played hockey for the Fort Alexander team. The team would come west into Alberta and Saskatchewan for hockey tournaments. It did all right in Alberta, but in Saskatchewan the team was usually frustrated by the legendary Gordon's Golden Hawks, among other teams.

Fontaine was elected chief of the band in 1973 and served two consecutive terms. Next he flirted with the dark side and worked for the Department of Indian Affairs as the regional director general in the Yukon.

He returned to Manitoba and earned a BA in political science at the University of Manitoba in 1981. Following graduation he was elected regional chief for the AFN, and in 1991 became grand chief for the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs.

It was during his first term as chief of the Assembly of First Nations that Fontaine revealed the abuse he had suffered in residential school.

This was the first revelation from a high-profile First Nations leader, and it opened the floodgates.

People had spoken for years about the hardships of the boarding schools, but it had never gained much prominence on the political agenda. But Fontaine's honesty brought the abuse out of the shadows.

It became apparent that our people were not alone in their suffering and that boarding schools had done serious damage to individuals, families and communities. The abuse has been at the root of so many of our social problems.

While Fontaine may have operated at a high level and negotiated with federal and provincial governments, he struggled with the boarding school legacy as did so many other First Nations people. It was his moral leadership that focused attention to the damage done by the schools, and led to the compensation payments and the official apology from Harper.

While no amount of money can undo the damage, it nevertheless was a moral victory for our people.

It was not the first time that he went out on a limb.

When he was the head of the Manitoba Chiefs Assembly, he hired a former gang member to reach out to the youth who were in gangs or at risk of becoming involved. He was roundly criticized by some of the more conservative chiefs and he had to withdraw the program.

In retrospect, he was ahead of his time and we can no longer ignore the serious issues facing our youth.

He has been able to raise the power and influence of the AFN's national chief. While Fontaine never backed down on his principles, he tempered his comments and refused to burn bridges. The election of a reactionary conservative government could have done serious damage, but he persevered. While the Kelowna Accord was lost, the government made the historic apology for the boarding school tragedy.

Whoever takes the reins will inherit a strong, respected organization and it will be up to the new chief to build on that foundation.

Source: Doug Cuthand
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