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An essential guide for understanding Native nation building

Rebuilding Native Nations

Strategies for Governance and Development

Edited by **MIRIAM JORGENSEN**

Foreword by **OREN LYONS**

Afterword by **SATSAN (HERB GEORGE)**

A revolution is underway among the Indigenous nations of North America. It is a quiet revolution, largely unnoticed in society at large. But it is profoundly important. From High Plains states and Prairie Provinces to southwestern deserts, from Mississippi and Oklahoma to the northwest coast of the continent, Native peoples are reclaiming their right to govern themselves and to shape their future in their own ways. Challenging more than a century of colonial controls, they are addressing severe social problems, building sustainable economies, and reinvigorating Indigenous cultures. In effect, they are rebuilding their nations according to their own diverse and often innovative designs.

Produced by the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy at the University of Arizona and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, this book traces the contours of that revolution as Native nations turn the dream of self-determination into a practical reality. Part report, part analysis, part how-to manual for Native leaders, it discusses strategies for governance and community and economic development being employed by American Indian nations and First Nations in Canada as they move to assert greater control over their own affairs.

Rebuilding Native Nations provides guidelines for creating new governance structures, rewriting constitutions, building justice systems, launching nation-owned enterprises, encouraging citizen entrepreneurs, developing new relationships with non-Native governments, and confronting the crippling legacies of colonialism. For nations that wish to join that revolution or for those who simply want to understand the transformation now underway across Indigenous North America, this book is a critical resource.

MIRIAM JORGENSEN is Associate Director for Research in the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy at the University of Arizona and Research Director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

"A landmark publication. Any person interested in Native Nations law and policy will want to have this book."

—Robert A. Williams, University of Arizona

"A significant contribution to the literature on American Indian development. [It will] contribute to broader discussions of developmental institutions for communities and for nations."

—Ronald Trosper, President, Indigenous Community Ventures

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Foreword

Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper, Onondaga Indian Nation

Our folks, the old folks, they always had a world view, a universal view. They saw everything. They saw the stars. They were in the cosmos. They knew about weather. They knew about everything. They always thought very, very big—universal.

Our nations are built on ceremonies, and our nations are built on understanding our relationships with the earth. I always give credit to the drummer for keeping the traditions, keeping the dances, keeping the languages, keeping the cultures, because that's who we are. We're cultures, with important values, and we have instructions that are increasingly recognized as important today.

In the history of the Haudenosaunee, when the Peacemaker came among our people some thousand years ago, he gave us the democratic processes of governance that we retain today. From what I know of all the people I have met and places I have traveled in Indian Country, they are all democratic. They all have the same understanding of freedom. They all have the same understanding of responsibility.

That's the instruction given to our peoples—to be responsible. To be grown up and act like grown-ups, and to take responsibility to look out for the future of our children.

The Peacemaker told us, "When you sit and you council for the welfare of the people, think not of yourself, nor of your family, nor even your generation." He instructed us to make our decisions on behalf of seven generations coming—those faces that are looking up from the earth, each layer waiting its time, coming, coming, coming.

We have a responsibility to them, to hold fast to our cultures, to hang on to our land, to follow the instructions, and to rebuild our

nations. There is a terrible history between our peoples and our brother who came from across the sea. And yet, here we are. We survive.

So what does that tell us? It tells us that we can depend on the genius of our own people, and on our abilities to meet the issues of the times. You know, none of us would be here if it weren't for our elders and the trailblazers among our people. If they weren't so quick on their feet, if they weren't able to think and problem solve, if they weren't able to move at the right time and in the right place, we wouldn't be here.

And it is *that* skill, which the stories in the chapters of this book demonstrate, that will ensure a future for our nations. It is the skill to hear the instructions of the old people, of the elders, to rebuild our nations with pride, with an understanding of our cultures, and with our sights set on the long road.

There's a lot of talk of "nation building"—and for all that the phrase correctly captures in acknowledging Indian peoples as *nations*, I don't like it. What we're really talking about is nation *rebuilding*. We've always been here; we're not newly built. We're falling back on the instructions and on the principles of government given to us by the old ones. The forms may change to meet new times. We may have to do some things in new ways. But we have to keep the principles. To continue our nations' strengths into the next century, we need to be intrepid but still good listeners—looking for the resonance within the elders' teachings and rebuilding the architecture of our nations to meet contemporary problems, to deal with contemporary concerns.

This book is not just about institutions and programs and business management and service provision. It's about being a leader

with a long-term vision. Every leader reading this knows there is plenty of trouble waiting at home. Everyone knows that when the phone rings at four o'clock in the morning, it's trouble. You have to answer it, you have to get out there, and you have to do what is right. The old chiefs, the old leaders, the old clan mothers were dependable, absolutely responsible people, and that's what leaders today have to be, too.

But doing what's right and responsible means looking to the long road, not getting lost in the demands of the moment. The instructions still resonate. This is not about who *I am*, or what *I have*. This is about our future, and the children coming, and the responsibilities of all leaders to their nations.

The leaders in my generation, we're kind of walking down the last part of our lives. I want to encourage the young leaders coming behind us to have a lot of courage, to stay strong, to keep your language, to "get back to planting."

That's what my uncle, Chief Shenandoah, *tadadaho* of the Haudenosaunee, would say. I would talk to him about these kinds of things, and he would look at me and say, "You had better start planting." And that's what it is. Planting takes all kinds of forms and all kinds of ideas. You can plant the seeds of a stronger nation; you can plant the seeds of a better future for your children and your children's children. Much in this book talks about how. And when you plant those seeds, they germinate and they grow.



Afterword

Satsan (Herb George), Hereditary Chief, Frog Clan, Wet'suet'en Nation, and Founder and President, National Centre for First Nations Governance

This book is long overdue. I want to acknowledge the vision of the people who brought this material together—the Native Nations Institute and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. They took the issues and challenges that exist within our communities, the barriers to success, and the experience of our peoples, and they turned all of that into a tool kit, a practical guide to how we can get organized to make the changes that we need.

What got my attention at the outset was how much we share in our experience as Native nations in the United States and Canada, despite our differences. For me in Canada, it goes back to the time of my grandfather, when the government came in to establish reserves and take the people off their land. We all went through it. We were pushed

on reserves, subjected to someone else's legislation, someone else's policies, made to speak their language. We were made dependent in so many aspects of our lives. It has done serious damage. And one of the most important things in our nations—our spirituality—has been damaged as well, swept away by the churches and the government. In some of our communities now there's a spiritual wasteland. Since that time our agenda has been to regain our place on our lands, to take back our laws, to take back our government, to take back responsibility for ourselves, and most of all, to reclaim the spirituality that is so important for us, and to fulfill our obligations to the land.

The Wet'suet'en and the Gitksan together spent many years in the courts in Canada pursuing the legal recognition of our right to the

land and the other rights associated with that. It took a long time. Periodically, our hereditary chiefs would have to come together to remind each other—to remind all of us—why we were doing it. The last time we did that was around 1996, before the Supreme Court in Canada ruled in the *Delgamuuk'w and Gis-dayway* case in 1997. And during that meeting, one of our chiefs said, “This is about putting a new memory in the minds of our children.”

That really stuck in my mind. I went home that day wondering what he meant by that, went to sleep that night wondering about it. When I woke up in the morning, I drove to the next community, went to his house, and I asked him, “Yesterday you said something about putting a new memory in the minds of our children. What did you mean by that?” He said that so much has changed with our people since the settlers came. They devastated us as a nation, took us off our land. Our language has suffered, our history is in disarray, our spirituality is almost done. He said, “That is all we have been talking about for the last many decades—the pain, the anger, the rage that came from that. Those are the memories we have. But what we are talking about with this court action that we have taken against Canada and British Columbia is putting ourselves in the position to start telling different stories to our children. That is what I meant by putting a new memory in the minds of our children. We have to get to the point where we stop talking in anger. We have to put ourselves in the position to tell stories about freedom, success, love, safety, and the kind of future we want to have.”

Sometime after that I was in an airport somewhere and I picked up a book about oral histories in South Africa prior to the dismantling of apartheid. The author said that one thing he learned was that you could tell the state of a nation and the health of its people by the stories that they tell. If their stories are

about pain and anger and suffering, then that is the state of the nation, the state of their health. If their stories are about freedom and achieving their goals, then that’s what’s going on. It reminded me of what that chief said. And that is what we’re trying to do in the governance centre we put together here: put a new memory in the minds of our children.

This book—*Rebuilding Native Nations*—makes me think of those things. It’s about making our own new stories. I look at it in terms of what our people have accomplished and what we have to do now. We are fighting to expand our jurisdiction. In the court, we gained a legal recognition, a legal right that we have in the land itself and all of the rights associated with that. If Canada or the province infringes on our rights, then a legal obligation arises. They have to not only consult with us but also accommodate us and compensate us for ongoing infringement. And the court also said that our inherent right to govern ourselves existed prior to Canadian confederation. It survives to this day. It puts us on a new footing with Canada, a government-to-government basis with shared jurisdiction. So we have significant leverage to take back our place on the land, to rescue our language, to take responsibility for ourselves, and to bring back our spirituality so that all of it lasts. You put all that in a bundle, and it gives us a foundation on which to rebuild our nations the way we want them to be and to restructure our governments so that they reflect what we want to accomplish. It gives us the foundation for an era of true self-determination. So that is the challenge we have. We have the opportunity to do these things. But now it’s up to us. We are the self in self-government, and we have to organize ourselves to get the job done. We have to take our own vision for the future and make it happen. This book gives us tools to work with. Now we need to get on with it.

