

Mercredi: "poverty deliberate policy"

by Andrea Buma

TORONTO - Ovide Mercredi, former Assembly of First Nations chief, is urging Native people who are interested in entering into economic partnerships with non-Native businesses to be cautious.

During his keynote address at the recent Economic Renewal Conference in Toronto, Mercredi said, "if you're going to get involved in economic partnerships, you'd better understand who you're dealing with."

He said that there have been many ideas about ways in which to improve the economic and social conditions of Indian people over the years, but that the poverty of Native communities is "not a historical accident."

Mercredi asserted, "the poverty of Native communities is the result of a deliberate policy of the federal government to ensure that our people not be able to gain power. By taking everything, the government has ensured that we cannot support ourselves."

The former chief lamented the fact that the traditional Native economy is not seen as a viable alternative in modern society.

He explained that when he was serving as AFN head he told Parliament if they wanted to help Native people they should make the fishing industry a national priority. He was told that the idea

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was in the past, that those days were over.

Mecredi suggested that the current system forces Natives to play "catch up" in order to join the modern economy. He said that Natives should not assume that the traditional economy cannot be regained.

He explained past problems are partially a result of the fact that Indians were just producers. For example, they sold furs but did not set the price. They were dependent on others to supply tools such as nets and traps, and often became enslaved to the credit system.

"We have to ensure that we are no longer dependent consumers," he said.

"We were like Quebec was 40 years ago. Until they decided not to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water any longer."

Mecredi warned the assembled that there is a difference for "the modern Indian businessman."

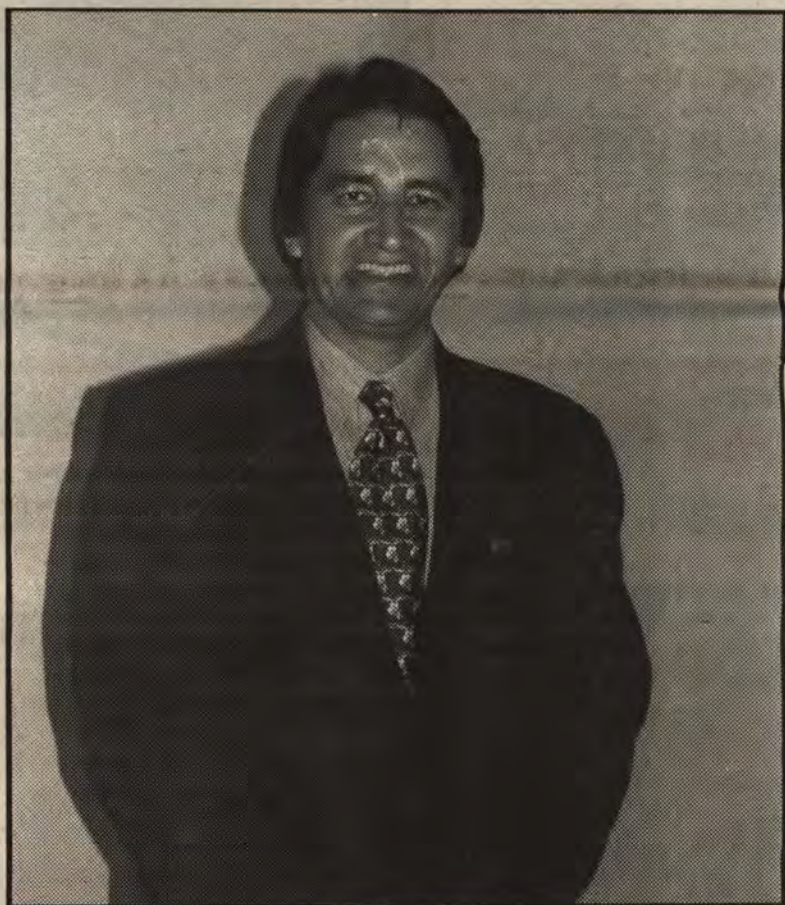
"Indians have to do business differently or else we too will generate a division of rich and poor," said Mecredi.

He warned that most governments have their own economic policy, but there is no one promoting a solely Indian policy. "We are expected to fit into the current system. But unless we develop our own policy, we will end up with an economy that is foreign."

After his speech, Mecredi told the *Teka* that he did not believe in partnerships.

"Make sure your print in your story that I'm against them," he said. "There's nothing wrong with working together, but there's no need for formal agreements."

George Francis, President and CEO of Xerox Canada, was more optimistic in his speech. He said that the company wants to double in 5 years from \$1 billion to \$2



Ovide Mecredi, former Assembly of First Nations Chief, gave a thought-provoking keynote address at a Toronto Economic Renewal conference last week.

billion.

He said "Our ability to learn from one another, our ability to trust one another is the basis for any partnership."

Francis was approached by the Canadian Corporation for Aboriginal Businesses with a request for a \$150,000 donation a few months ago, and he said "yes" provided he could be a board member.

Francis says that he believes that "you cannot have partnership without a common understanding," and he is working towards an understanding of Aboriginal people.

Xerox Canada has been providing 4 year \$3,000 scholarships

to Aboriginal since 1994, and has just doubled their commitment. They will be offering 8 scholarships this year, and applications are available at band offices.

Francis says he is "delighted with the level of graduates" who have graduated in fields like architecture, computer science, and medicine."

The conference co-chair finished with the optimistic thought, "I want to be able to talk to friends and business colleagues so we can say 'We have made a difference.' In a conference like this five years from now -- which is only 1,000 work days away -- we will all be excited over what has been accomplished."