

Roger Adolph is the Community Coordinator for the Interior Region.

He works with the Aboriginal Peoples' Family Accord, a collective of leaders who are working to gain more control over support and services to children and families in their communities. The following are Roger's words on the progress of government control over aboriginal community life, and what APFA, and the St'at'imc, are doing about it.

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Interview by Kerry Coast

Since time immemorial, we as Native people have always looked after our children and families, and we have our own systems. The old system that was in place was more or less in the communities, and that kept the children and families strong.

I grew up in Mt Currie, it used to be called Creekside then, in the 1950's. I remember how it used to be conducted before the Ministry of Children and Families. They would gather, very tight-knit communities in those days. If a problem came up with the way a child was being raised, wherever the problem was happening, if the parents were reluctant to change their ways, mainly in respect of discipline, the grandmothers of the community would move in. They would sit down with the parents, and this was common practice, and it was time to let the auntie or uncle or grandparents take over the child. And the family was behind this.

As parents we can spoil our children so easily, as parental love overcomes the discipline that we should give them. We love them so much that we spoil them.

And the parents, as much as they didn't like it, there was nothing they could do about it, this is just the way it went.

The parents would be all distraught, especially the mother, because the child has been taken away. But they're just going across the street. And the family all gets together and they help out.

When the child becomes of age they take them hunting, fishing, berry picking; the teaching starts, the discipline starts, but in a real nice way, it's not harsh. And children grew up knowing what self-respect is, what respect for others is, knowing those basic traits as to what it is to be a decent human being.

After the Second World War, poverty became really heavy in our communities. There was no such thing as Band Offices as we have today. In the forties, the government recognized there were the beginnings of poverty and alcohol problems. What they put in place was the welfare system to meet the needs of the poverty and alcohol abuse. Alcohol and welfare are two things that really put our people down in the '40's and '50's. Under the Indian Act, they didn't have a way, well they did, but it comes down to money and politics, to solve the problems created by alcoholism.

In 1951, the Federal government transferred responsibility for children and families to the province. At that time, less than one percent of children in care were aboriginal. ("In care" would have been church-run orphanages.) That doesn't include residential school, although I think that should be considered 'in care.' Today, 55% of children in care in BC are aboriginal. And we're only 3% of the population.

In 1951 the province took this over, and there must have been so much money involved. Probably millions. The 9 service delivery components of Children and Families, this is what the feds gave to the province without consulting us.

The 9 provisions are: Child Protection (apprehension), Guardianship (definition of a legal guardian), Adoptions, Family Development, Early Childhood Development and Supported Child Development, Youth Justice, Child and Youth Mental Health, Special Needs Children and Youth, Child Care Subsidies.

The Head-Start programs running in communities do not qualify as delivering any of these services. They are seen as delivering education. We've been talking about being able to expand the Head-Starts to include more of these services. But the budget for APFA, for the whole province, is just \$1.3 million. And recently it was cut back to \$1 million, while the BC Ministry for Children and Families hired 23 aboriginal people to work for them.

A lot of things happened in the '50's and '60's that didn't help us much. Then in the 1980's, Spallumcheen got sole responsibility and jurisdiction over children and families. Both the federal and provincial government to this day say 'there will never be another Spallumcheen.'

And what do you say?

I say bullshit.

First of all, going back a little bit, we've always, maintained that we have our own inherent right over our entire existence, and children and families is part of that. The feds say, 'no, we have jurisdiction under the Child and Family Services Act,' so again it's their law that they made up to gain control.

I whole-heartedly believe that APFA, and other organizations, will get us back to a place of control. Now our children are up to 55% of the children in care in BC, and we're still not seeing any services at the community level. The only service they've jolted loose is Child Protection, actually child apprehension, and that's to delegated agencies.

Our leadership has made it very clear that the province has no jurisdiction over our children. The province has said they would hand over that control, but only through a delegated process. And that's bullshit.

A lot of our communities are using delegated agencies without giving up their inherent rights. Our people use an agency from Lytton, Nlaka'pamux Child and Family Services, and one from Merritt. You know what I call it? This control over our families? Money and politics.

In 2002 the province came forward and said OK, we're willing to come up with a change: not delegated authority, but "blended authority." In June 2002, there was a big meeting at Tsaawwassen, the province was there, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, Assembly of First

Nations, Friendship Centres, Native Women's groups, and Metis associations were there. The leadership of all the native organizations came together to reject "blended authority," and work out a whole new mechanism where we're saying, we have an inherent right to this control. That was the Tsawwassen Accord.

In September of 2002, a big meeting was held to create a memorandum of Understanding as to how to move forwards out of this disagreement. With the MOU, BC committed dollars, and out of this came the Aboriginal Peoples' Family Accord. The province wanted "regionalization" and "transformation." The MOU basically states that we will work towards regionalization, instead of all the orders coming from Victoria, and that it will be community based. I think I have an idea that there is something more behind those two words, "regionalization" and "transformation."

Our region consists of Okanagans, Secwepmc, Tsilhqot'in, St'át'imc, and Nlaka'pamux. Parts of those 5 nations are one region. I'm being told Mt Currie, Skátin, Douglas, these are not in my 'zone.'

How can they tell me I can't talk to my own people? APFA is telling me my boundary stops at D'Arcy. That doesn't mean I have to do it. I've talked to Lester Ned, the coordinator for the Lower St'lát'limx Tribal Council. I just want to talk about child and family services.

We all agreed in 1998 to deal with this Children and Families issue as a Tribe. There's a resolution on file that all 11 communities agreed to work together on this one. However, easier said than done.

What we are doing with APFA is working towards interim authority. What that means to me is, how are we going to organize ourselves to take over children and families needs? It has to be community driven. And this is where Community Coordinators come in. I was hired in January of this year. I coordinate 23 Bands, 2 Metis associations from Merritt and Ashcroft, 2 Friendship Centers, and 2 delegated agencies.

Getting ourselves organized at the community level is my work right now. I go into the communities and explain more about this problem we have here, and ask them, "what are we going to do about it." First of all, they want to know what APFA is, and what are we going to do different than BC. There's a lot of suspicion and mistrust. That's going to be my big challenge. We're just coming out of a dysfunctional era, and now we've got to put it right. And it's got to be the people who decide.

The APFA vision is that "Strong children make strong nations." It's going to be hard to fulfill that vision, I don't think I'll see it in my lifetime. We can start setting a path as to how we're going to deal with this problem we have.

We've talked about it in our communities, we talk and talk and talk about the problems we have, and we've gotten very good at it. Now it's time for us to talk solutions, in my mind. And that's my job.

I honestly believe that a child who is raised in a healthy household will grow up to be able to deal with nay problem that comes their way.

So how do we support that healthy household?

I think we need to talk about it. We need to get together. I support family meetings. There are disabilities, handicaps, sicknesses that we're having to deal with now. And the biggest sicknesses are stress and low self-esteem.

This is where the family comes in. But the Ministry, the first thing they do is isolate the child. That's the biggest thing we've got to take charge of. We've got to start helping our kids, we've got to get down in that dirty dungeon.

There's a community near here that has 300 children in care. Nobody wants them. They go from house to house to house, and that's what APFA has to decide, what can we do for them. We can't just leave them there.

There's no knight in shining armour that's going to come and save us. We have to do it ourselves. I think the family is where it's at. And some communities are doing it, piece by piece, trying to get some of that dignity back. We were the richest people in the world because we had dignity. Now we're the poorest people in the world because all we've got is a little bit of money. But when we had dignity, boy oh boy, nobody or nothing could break us.

I like APFA's approach. They are putting a big emphasis on language and culture, and to me, that's where the answers are. We had a strategic planning session. The fact that we rely on government funding makes us weak. But that's where it is right now, because our nations don't have the money or the ability to do it. Look at our political set-up here, very strong, but we don't have the money. We're going to be stuck with delegated authority until we pay for our services by ourselves. And that goes right back to the roadblock, with control over our lands and resources.

We have got to get to the sore. Alcoholism, low self-esteem, these are symptoms. But how do we get to what's causing that? To me, the answer lies in our language, our culture and our people. We need to give our children our language, culture, discipline, love and attention.