The New Leaders: Khelsilem

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Introduction

There are many leaders who are Indigenous that have taken on systems and have succeeded to change our world for the greater good. Khelsilem is one of those leaders. He was born and raised in his traditional Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh) territories. He attended Carson Graham Secondary and Simon Fraser University (SFU). Khelsilem is a fluent Squamish language speaker and identifies as bisexual and queer. He has been using his voice to raise awareness of Indigenous language extinction, education, stolen lands, Indigenous land and governance, and the creation of colonial Canada. As a member of the Squamish Nation Council and Director at the Vancity Credit Union, he has been working to provide government and corporate transparency and address land develop. Khelsilem has inspired many and has become a role model for a diverse group of people. As a politician, he has changed several minds about what it means to be an Indigenous leader, specifically what it means to be a Sḵwx̱wú7mesh millennial leader. Khelsilem is making authentic and meaningful change for Indigenous and non-indigenous people alike.
Biography of Khelsilem

Khelsilem Tl’aḵwasiḵan Sxwcháltən was born on July 19, 1989. His colonial name is Dustin Rivers. Until he was seven, Khelsilem was raised by his paternal grandmother, Audrey Rivers, who was like a mother to them growing up. She was the one who gave him the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh name ɬélsílem (Khelsilem) to carry, one of three names he received in 2011. Khelsilem is Sḵwx̱wú7mesh on his mom and father’s side of the family, and Kwakwaka’wakw on his mother’s side. He was raised in the Squamish Nation communities of Eslhá7an, also known as the Mission Indian Reserve No.6, and Xwmelch’stn, also known as Capilano Indian Reserve No.5, in North Vancouver, British Columbia. He currently lives in Vancouver. He attended Carson Graham Secondary School and some graduate degree classes at Simon Fraser University in Applied Linguistics. Khelsilem is a fluent Squamish language speaker which he learned as an adult. In 2015, he founded the non-profit Kwi Awt Stelmexw, an arts and education organization with the mission to restore Squamish language and culture and in 2016 developed a language immersion program with Simon Fraser University to teach the Squamish language to Squamish people. He continued to teach for two years in the program he built before leaving the program upon being elected to the Squamish Nation Council. As an Indigenous Canadian politician and First Nations leader in British Columbia, Khelsilem is serving as councillor for the Squamish Nation Council as the youngest Councillor elected in the 2017 election; he topped the polls with the most votes and was appointed as one of two Official Spokespersons for the Squamish Nation Council. As a frequent critic of LNG projects and the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project, Khelsilem was recognized by Vancouver Magazine as one of the Top 50 powerful people at #23 in 2018, and again in 2019 at #19. He
was elected a director of the Vancity Credit Union this past spring. In July 2019, Khelsilem publicly came out as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community. Proudly queer, he even finds the time to put on high heels and perform vogue.

The Issues Addressed and Approach Taken

Through his activist political work, Khelsilem is addressing a multitude of issues. Most recently he has taken on the centuries long fight to get Squamish Nation’s lands back, specifically the village of Seḿált. The Sḵwx̱wú7mesh people had houses, an orchard, and fish traps here. There were wild cabbages, mushrooms, berries, muskrats, ducks and so much smelt you could rake them up from the water with a stick. But Seḿált was in the middle of the settlers’ expanding metropolis. In April 1913, the provincial government flexed its Indian Act powers and forced the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh residents to sell them the land in the middle of a real estate boom for an unfair price. Residents were given two days to leave. When they were gone, the government burned Seḿált. The Squamish Nation fought for decades to get their land back. In 2003, 10.5 acres of the 80-acre government-designated reserve were returned to their original inhabitants. The nation has something big in the works: a new village of about 6,000 homes. This land reclamation will shout that Vancouver is an Indigenous place through Sḵwx̱wú7mesh design. Khelsilem, as a councillor of the Squamish Nation, has been instrumental in unrolling these grand plans. In addition, he has also spearheaded the creation of his Nation’s non-profit housing society Hiýámta Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, which translates to “The Squamish are Coming Home.” At the same time, his nation has partnered with the Musqueam and Tsleil-
Waututh First Nations to redevelop massive sites that will transform the city’s west side, such as the 90-acre Jericho Lands and 21-acre Heather Lands. Khelsilem believes his greatest strength as a politician is a quieter skill with a deeper impact: researching something, then giving it a try. In high school, when he was upset about the lack of Indigenous history, he took to Wikipedia to fill it with articles on everything from Indigenous leaders to how BC treaties worked. When he became a politician, he researched the best governance model for the Squamish’s housing non-profit and helped his friend Christine Boyle, a Vancouver councillor, craft a proposal for a complex development tax. His ability to help change the future is what inspired him to run for the very council that frustrated him as a teen.

Making A Difference

Khelsilem has become a role model that has helped to challenge individual, societal, and systemic racist colonial beliefs. He has always spoken up because he did not like the idea that politics is only for politicians. While many millennials turned to blogs in their teen years to write about anime, fashion, or high-school drama, Khelsilem decided to take on colonization. Its lasting effects seemed to touch every aspect of his life growing up on the North Shore in Squamish communities. He was angry at his settler public school in North Vancouver for teaching a European view of history and turning people into what he called “drones” for jobs. He was angry at the Squamish Nation Council for not doing more to revitalize Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, their language. He was angry that when he spoke up, they often told him things like “you don’t understand the complexity of this.” Khelsilem was also frustrated with Squamish career
politicians, how some elected officials also served as nation staff and the lack of transparency when it came to information and spending. He published nighttime posts while others slept, challenging leaders in his own community, but also colonialism and the creation of Canada at large. He was angry at Christianity for being used to “civilize” his people, angry at elections for trying to make settler government look legitimate, angry at Indigenous tourism for manufacturing “authentic” experiences like salmon dinners. Eventually, Khelsilem turned his attention to learning Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and it was not long before he began teaching what he knew. At the time in 2009, there were around 10 fluent speakers of Sḵwx̱wú7mesh. He wanted to help make more. When riding public transit in multicultural Metro Vancouver, Khelsilem would hear other languages from Farsi to Vietnamese. This made him want to learn his own even more: “I wanted to be able to be on the bus and speak my language with somebody.”

After learning from teachers like Vanessa Campbell and Peter Jacobs, who teaches at the University of Victoria’s Indigenous language revitalization program, Khelsilem was eager to pass the language on. He established a Sḵwx̱wú7mesh immersion program at SFU, launch two podcasts to teach the language, and help a Vancouver city councillor use it to welcome people in council chambers.

Khelsilem The Role Model

Khelsilem is an inspirational leader to many for his advocacy and activism. He was deeply influenced by his grandmother, Audrey Rivers, as she was very regal, very poised person with a lot of kindness for people, but she was also super fierce, strong willed and righteous in her values. Khelsilem’s grandfather was Frank Rivers Sr., who also served on the nation’s
council, and his great-grandfather was Andy Paull, a well-known Skwxwú7mesh leader, lobbyist, longshoreman and lacrosse coach who was trained as a lawyer but refused to be called to the bar because it would mean giving up his Indian status. Calling himself a “lawyer without a ticket,” he persisted as a respected authority on Indigenous law who could quote cases chapter and verse. The papers called him “Canada’s Indian conscience.” On his mother’s side, great-great-grandfather Sam Scow of the Kwakwaka’wakw was a hereditary chief who fought the potlatch ban and was jailed for four months at Oakalla Prison for breaking by sharing an apple. “Some families probably grow up and don’t think that politics is interesting or useful, but my family understood political action as a noble calling” states Khelsilem. For instance, in high school, he had a chance to criticize his history teacher and public education on CBC. In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of Canada for the damage of residential schools and failing Indigenous people “so profoundly.” The CBC wanted a high-school student’s perspective on the apology and invited Khelsilem as a guest on the morning show. Grandmother Audrey Rivers had attended the St. Paul’s Residential School in North Vancouver, just up the hill from where Khelsilem had lived with her. He was a student at Carson Graham Secondary in North Vancouver, where his favourite subjects were history, law, and social studies. But the textbooks talked about Indigenous people as though they were all extinct. The whole section on culture was in past tense: The Coastal Salish people would have potlatches, they used to hunt and gather food from the territory, they used to fish. He was not shy to share his views on air as asserted that “history classes don’t teach the true history. We spend more time learning about Egyptians and Greeks than we do our own history here in Canada.” His
teacher was listening to the interview and told Khelsilem that now they would spend a whole
day on residential schools. He knew back then that we still had a long way to go.

Inspiring Us and Challenging Our Thinking

Khelsilem has challenged and changed our way of thinking. For instance, several of us
questioned what one person could do to change the world. We now realize that one person
makes all the difference, look at what Khelsilem has accomplished, and he is only in his thirties.
We also wondered how a politician could have a positive impact as we see so many looking out
only for themselves and not the people they represent. We noticed that Khelsilem does not
lead for the sake of leading or for his own power and ego, he leads to bring people together
and to inspire younger Indigenous and non-Indigenous trailblazers to act. We further thought
that he would only be out to improve his people’s experiences but realize now that he hopes
settlers will see what a Canadian future with Indigenous involvement could look like when they
are affirmed their rightful place at the table as they are stanch advocates for the environment,
the climate and understand what the impacts are of disparity in wealth. We now understand
that Canada will benefit from Indigenous leadership culturally, socially, economically, and
politically. As youth, we further resonate with Khelsilem and the anger he felt as a teen. We
realize that we too can convert it into a different energy as angry indignation is important,
powerful, and legitimate but it often does not help move things forward. We can feel angry but
channel it into diplomacy and advocacy, something that will have a positive impact. Lastly, we
are hopeful for the future and that is not how we often feel. We trust that the marginalization
of Indigenous Peoples in all aspects of Canadian society will become an absurd thought and action. It seems like we are moving through a transition period where control and influence are being returned to the people who had control and influence here previously, and we are settlers realize that we are willing to share. We still have a long way to go on that, but we think we are headed in the right direction.

Conclusion

Using his diverse skills and passions, Khelsilem is creating a better space for all of us who call Vancouver home. Born on the traditional Sḵw̱x̱wú7mesh territories, he was raised and inspired by great leaders within his family. He went to public school in North Vancouver and attending university at SFU. At both educational institutions, he became acutely aware of the stereotypes and erasure of Indigenous peoples within social studies, law, and history courses. As an adult, Khelsilem learned his native Squamish language. He also came out as a proud two spirit person. Khelsilem’s political activism and advocacy has spanned many interconnected issues such as Indigenous language extinction, land and governance, and colonial education and the history and present reality of Canada. As a Squamish Nation Council member and Director at Vancity Credit Union, he is committed to decolonial change within these institutions. Ultimately, he has inspired so many people with his diplomatic advocacy and has shifted many people’s limited understanding of what a new leader looks like and can accomplish. As a Sḵw̱x̱wú7mesh politician he has changed several minds about what it means to be a young Indigenous leader. Khelsilem is a mentor for all people on these lands.
As he proclaims, “There were leaders before I came into this world who made decisions to create a benefit for me what we’re doing right now is going to make things better for those who aren’t even born yet.” Indeed, that is exactly what Khelsilem is doing.
Works Cited


