Interviewer: Kim Gillcrist
Location: Conne River, Newfoundland and Labrador

Gillcrist: Ready when you are.

Joe: OK. My name is Gerard Joe and I’m the Director of Economic Development for the Conne River community band Council, and I’m also a council member holding the portfolio for Conne River Health and Social Services.

Gillcrist: Perfect. In what ways has the path to self-governance for Conne River impacted your life?

Joe: At the present stage, I would say that it hasn’t impacted it drastically. Conne River’s been pretty progressive as it is in self-government. Mostly I guess in the last couple of years it’s been information sharing, finding exactly what the community views of self-government – what their interpretation of it is. So for the most part for me the impact has been gaining knowledge.

Gillcrist: So can you describe to me a little more in detail what your role has been? Like what kind of role do you play with the self-government process?

Joe: I play a very minor role within self-government because self-government is community driven. Being a councilor, my role is participating in focus groups, bringing our ideas and concepts forward. My understanding of the self-government progress and how it moves forward… it has to be community driven. At the end of the day, self-government will look like what this community wants it to be, and that may be totally different from what I want it to be.

Gillcrist: So what have been some of the best experiences that you’ve seen with self-governance?

Joe: The sharing of knowledge and sharing of ideas I think has been the best, as again, taking into account that I’ve been on council for about twelve years and sometimes you can get into a rough situation where you think you pretty well know exactly what the community wants. And sometimes that’s tricky because sometimes that’s sixty degrees different. So for me, it’s been a learning experience and understanding that… the other big thing is having the youth getting involved. Their idea of self-government is a little bit different from my age group’s, where I’m middle age, and then the older generation too - my dad’s age. So there’s three generations in my house, actually four – including my granddaughter. There are some pretty good political views at times. But, I think that the sharing of knowledge has been the greatest one for me. And what I see

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coming out of self-government is the youth becoming involved and they've been very active in saying “this is what we believe self-government path we should take” and again, it’s not our role. If you look at the amount of time council is involved in self-government, it’s very little. I’ll say it again, when we have progress reports come back from the elders, progress reports come back from the youth, and basically, this is what they’re saying. We may get into a debate around council saying “Well gee, we didn’t know that”, or “we think it’s this way”. But self-government is only going to move forward if this community is ready for it, first of all. So we have a big job ahead of us, and ensuring that the right information goes out there to the community. I’ll put it to you this way: if self-government fails and the vote takes place for self-government and it doesn’t go through, it’s because we haven’t done a good job communicating. That’s the bottom line.

Gillcrist: From the other side of the coin, what have been some of the bigger obstacles or barriers that you’ve had to overcome?

Joe: Well, first of all, there was an obstacle getting in underneath the Indian Act – people feel safe. I feel even from a government point of view, that for me, I’d want to know: what recourse do I have? If we become self-government what recourse do I have? Right now, the community, and by-and-large most band members, feel that if government is doing something that I don’t agree with well, my first is I'll go through to the Annual Assemblies and voice my opinion. But if we continue to move on a path that this community doesn’t want to go to, or the majority doesn’t want to go to, the recourse is: we'll write a letter to Indian Affairs. So that ‘check and balance’ has to be there, in my mind. And so getting it out to the community and ensuring that they have that route to go to, you know, if government is not going where we want them to go, what recourse do we have? That’s the challenge, because people feel that right now, I have that recourse. If the government is doing something I don’t agree with, I can go to Indian Affairs. And then an investigation takes place. So we have to ensure those things are in place – that’s the biggest challenge.

Gillcrist: So what does self-government in Conne River look like to you?

Joe: Right now? Or what it's going to look like?

Gillcrist: Right now.

Joe: Self-government to me, now what it looks like is that government is elected every two years. That’s how I try to explain it to the committee. Departments are run by directors, which ensures.... It’s funny that you’re asking me that because I’m doing my operational plan for INAC and we’re just going through some of the successes: Why are we successful in this community? I’ll read them off for you:
  o The programs are community driven.
o Good planning by all departments. (Doesn’t mean we can’t improve on that, but it is good planning.)
o Good communication between departments. (We share ideas between departments, so myself and Phoebe [Keeping] don’t work here by ourselves, we work in conjunction with other departments and we draw on their strengths.)
o Share a common vision and goal. (We have focus groups within the community and all those paths we take may be different, but at the end we all want to get to the same place.)
o Accountability by the government to the community through Assembly reports. (Annually, we have to present our reports to the community. And basically, that’s a progress report. You know, what did your department do over twelve months? Where did you spend your money? How did you spend your money? Why did you spend it this way and why didn’t you do it this way? So again, accountability is ensured.)
o This community has well-developed Human Resources.
o There is a highly motivated work force.
o Ongoing monitoring and evaluations of departments and programs. (But the biggest thing that I see here in this community is that the chief and council can change every two years, but your directors and managers don’t. The stay the same. So that means that the Director of Natural Resources, for example, is in the process of developing a program that’s going to take five years. If, in a year and a half, government changes and if that Director changed, then you’re back to square one. That doesn’t happen here. Your Director of Natural Resources has probably been here for fifteen years, so there’s continuity. And so your progress reports can continue – they don’t take two leaps forward and three backward, and they get monitored on a regular basis.

**Gillcrist:** OK. So what does that mean to you? What does self-government mean in your life?

**Joe:** Well what it means for me is... the community elects the government every two years; departments have their managers that continue to be there and to be accountable to chief and council and directly to the community. Which is to me, self-government. That’s as close as we can get right now. What it means in the future is that we can come out underneath the Indian Act, but only if the community chooses to go that way. And that’s the key. And it’s not what I want, or the chief, or a council member. If this community doesn’t want to take that path, then we have to bide by that law.

**Gillcrist:** So in terms of a day-to-day basis, how do you see that functioning for your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and for your community later down the road?
Joe: Again, we have to go back, and if this community chooses for self-government then we continue on the same path. Which is employment: long-term and short-term employment, social benefit, cultural benefits and to continue to be accountable to this community. I don't see that changing. Actually, the biggest thing: if this community chooses to go to self-government, there will be some checks and balances in there to ensure that they have some avenue if there's a government in there that they choose once they get in and realize OK, it's not the right government, they're going down the wrong path; I'm confident that this community will have something in place that ensures that they can correct that, and correct it fast.

Gillcrist: OK. So, you're familiar with the exploratory process that Conne River has taken?

Joe: Oh yes.

Gillcrist: So can you describe how you think the process was handled not only by your community, but also by the federal and provincial governments while you're going through the negotiations?

Joe: How is it handled now? Or how is it going to be handled?

Gillcrist: How has it been handled so far?

Joe: From the community's point of view, most of where we are today has been done through consultation with the community. So the path that we're on now is the path that the community has chosen us to be on. In relations to both the province and the federal government, our chief and council have developed a good working relationship with both. And I think it's a new process, and I think at all levels of government what we're going through is growing pains right now. But by and large I think we're on the path, and I think we've proven somewhat to INAC and the federal government and the province that we're capable of doing what we say we want to do, because we already have a long history of achieving a lot of goals here.

Gillcrist: OK. What kind of advice would you offer to other First Nations that are thinking about endeavouring into the same process?

Joe: Success or failure, it depends on being community driven. If it's individually driven, and it does succeed, it will fail at some point because it's not community driven. It has to be driven by any community, just like any programs should be driven by the community, and then you ensure you have a great chance of success. So my advice is, if you're going to move forward on anything, go into focus groups.
Gillcrist: If the process were to begin again from the start, would you make any changes?

Joe: No, I don't think so, not from my point of view. Now, again, you have to keep in mind that I'm just one individual and for me, it's the process as community driven and having the youth involved in self-government. No, I can't see any changes that would drastically affect the progress.

Gillcrist: OK, so I'm going to start to wrap up a little bit. As you know, Mount A is in the process of documenting your progress through self-governance and the path of self-governance. Do you think that this is going to benefit anyone? And how? Who do you think is going to benefit from this initiative?

Joe: It'll benefit whoever you make a package available to. If it becomes an information package that's within your department and it doesn't move out, then it's going to benefit very little. If you make the information available to all First Nations, then… well, a good example is: we write business plans here. We don't develop templates because they're already there. So basically what you started… you basically have a template of self-government. Which means that any First Nations can go into it, take that template and say, “OK, I now have something to start with. We can change it and mold it around.” So, it can benefit whoever you make your progress report or your information available to. [Conversation follows about the project being online and available.]

Gillcrist: OK, well I think that’s pretty much it for me – is there anything that I haven’t touched on or asked you that you feel is important, anything of other significance that you want to add?

Joe: No. I think my biggest comment to you is that it has to be community driven. Because sometimes if it’s driven by the government, the government doesn’t always see what the community wants at times. So it definitely has to come from the community. And at the end of the day, it may not be what I want, but it’s not my self-government - it’s their self-government, and my grandchildren’s and great-grandchildren’s. That's the bottom line.