

Indian Affairs

This is not a crisis which has just arisen. It was first brought to my attention more than five years ago. I have put the matter before two Ministers, representing two Governments, formed by two different political Parties. I have raised the matter almost every week for five years. During that time, the Ministers have changed, the Government has changed, even the philosophies of Government have changed. What has basically remained unchanged is the bureaucratic structure in the offices of the Department of Indian Affairs in Hull and Vancouver. That structure is the one common element which stands over the years as an impediment in the way of producing essential remedies.

At a meeting of the Standing Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Affairs and Northern Development on December 1, 1982, the problems associated with the Westbank Indian Band were the main topic. The witness on that day was a senior official of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Mr. Joe Leask. I ask you to note, Mr. Speaker, that the exchange which I am about to quote took place three and a half years ago. If I were to ask the people in my constituency, the people most involved and most obviously concerned, what has changed as a result of our combined efforts over that 42 month period, the answer, I am sure, would be: "Nothing has changed, absolutely nothing". Therein lies my frustration and the frustration of those people whom I represent in Ottawa, whose lifetime investments in money and effort are put in jeopardy by the failure of successive Ministers, acting, I am sure, upon the advice of departmental officials, to honour the terms of property lease contracts on the Westbank Indian Reserve. These leases provide the basis on which its individual businesses exist. Yet the breaking of such guarantees as "the peaceful enjoyment of the occupancy" are not just casually accepted by persons acting on behalf of the Crown, but in numerous cases are actually aided and abetted by departmental action or inaction.

Is it any wonder that people cry foul and suspect cover-up, conspiracy, collusion and worse. It is this circumstance which caused my outburst at the standing committee meeting on December 1, 1982, and which was recorded in *Hansard* as follows:

● (1640)

What really bothers me about the whole situation is that—it appears to me that the whole object of the department is to cover everyone's backside. The main reason there are delays is that there are skeletons in the closets; the last people who want them out are the people sitting around this table representing the department. That is the impression I get after harping on this for more than a year.

There is really no intent to bring things out into the open. Is there any place where the ordinary qualities of decency and honesty and integrity, upon which democracy must be secure—is there any of that in the department?

That statement was made more than four years ago; but the same facts pertain today. We are still being discouraged at every turn in our attempts to get information and to bring about change.

Not just MPs are frustrated. There is a dissident group of Westbank Band members representing more than 50 per cent of the band membership who have registered their complaints with the Minister and with departmental officials. They plead with me as their Member of Parliament to assist them in obtaining access to certain information which they believe it to be their right to obtain in support of their demand that the chief and council be removed from office. I have to tell them that we as MPs have no better success in getting information than they do themselves.

The question must be put, why? Why after five years of effort do the same problems exist? Why has nothing substantial been done to correct the situations which various inquiries have identified as immoral, illegal and which have been described in other equally damaging terms? That is what we are contending with and that is what we are trying to correct. While we have been carrying the message to Ottawa that things are out of hand in Westbank, that unworthy actions are being taken by band council in the name of the Crown, that individuals are being intimidated and defrauded of assets worth millions of dollars, again in the name of the Crown, what reaction do we receive from those responsible in Ottawa in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development? The then Minister, the Hon. John Munro, in July of 1982 said this in the House of Commons:

—no one has provided the Department with information to back up the charges—not once have the Hon. Members turned over any names to which they are directing their allegations. They have not turned over any document of any kind substantiating any type of misconduct—

At about the same time Fred Wachli, Regional Director, B.C. Region of the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, had this to say to the newspapers:

—a lot of allegations have been made about the band which have us baffled—from a review of our records there is no truth to them—

That is the attitude and position taken within the system.

I would like to note a few of the allegations which were in the hands of the Minister of the day and in the hands of the Department. The first is from a mobile home park owner. It is a sworn statement provided by a lawyer for a group which is suffering. This is what he said:

The band—has practised a pattern of intimidation throughout by demanding, for example, that a Lease Holder enter into a new Lease under threats of administrative abuses such as higher rents or refusing to consent to sell a leasehold interest. These actions have been reported repeatedly to the Department of Indian Affairs officials and they have not intervened in these abuses whatsoever.

The Band has published and distributed misleading documents to the detriment of the earning capacity of the leaseholders. The Department of Indian Affairs has taken no action—

The Department of Indian Affairs officials and the Minister have denied the existence of information which they have previously been given—

The Department of Indian Affairs acting on unconfirmed and unjustified information cancelled a lease in which the sum of \$366,000.00 had been invested on the basis of false information and made no attempt whatsoever to confirm or deny the facts before doing so.

The following is from a prospective leasee on the Westbank Indian Band Reserve: