

Private Members' Business

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this motion. I hope, if we are to make this gesture, that it will not be an empty gesture but one that will recognize and do more than has ever been done for the aboriginal people of Canada.

Mr. Ross Reid (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to say a few words on this matter.

My colleagues have addressed it in a number of ways. I was interested to hear a couple of the comments of my colleague from Nunavut, which I guess will be the new name of the constituency as rightly it should be, about recognizing aboriginal people every day.

One interesting result of the very difficult times we have seen in the last years as we have discussed our Constitution has been a change in attitudes dealing with aboriginal people and aboriginal issues. There has been a change in understanding not only of aboriginal people but thankfully in the attitude of non-aboriginal people in relation to those people and a greater understanding of the historical and cultural contribution of aboriginal people.

I question myself all the time on this point, but I genuinely believe there is a new commitment among Canadian people not only to resolve the problems plaguing aboriginal people for hundreds of years but also to recognize that the tremendous number of problems and challenges aboriginal and northern people face are not problems of their own creation and that solutions are found in the attitudes and actions of all of us in this country.

In coming forward with a solution like this one perhaps we can focus on a number of things, like education. If we can focus the resolve of governments, the resolve of the community and the resolve of interest and support groups on looking at some of the concerns and at what some of the solutions might be, we as a country will be stronger and much better off.

People have said to me in the past that the issues of different provinces are not issues that pertain to them. Some of the historical concerns and some of the history and culture of Quebec, for instance, are of no relationship to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

I have always argued and I firmly believe that whatever the history of a particular people or a particular group of people, be it the history of Quebec, the history of Ukrainian people in western Canada or the history of those people who came and developed the Fraser River in British Columbia, it is as much a part of the history and the culture of modern day Newfoundland and Labrador as our history and culture, as diverse as they are, are part of theirs. Inevitably we can find connections.

What has happened to all of us collectively, even though there may have been no relationship, impacts on all of us today and in the future. It is something we should feel proud of and, however vicariously, take some ownership of and feel some possession of. Perhaps there is no other group in this country than the first people of this country, those people who came here perhaps 35,000 and 40,000 years ago in some cases. They were the people who were here when the European settlers came. They were the people who welcomed the European settlers as early as 1497 in the case of eastern Canada, and I suspect probably 500 years before that when the Norse came to L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern island of Newfoundland. If we can begin to understand they are part of our history then we are taking the first step to ensuring that we are sensitive in everything we do to that particular history, to that initial ownership and to that initial possession.

• (1140)

Aboriginal people lived, farmed, hunted, fished and occupied this land. They had governments that allowed well developed, highly developed cultures and societies not only to function as individual entities but to relate to each other and to develop structures that allowed for a reasonable and sensible ongoing day-to-day and long term living together.

We consider that the base of self-government. It is not something government gives or even the Constitution gives. It is something we should all recognize. We all have to recognize that aboriginal people particularly are facing challenges more and greater than the rest of us in many cases. The whys of that is something I suppose we could debate for a long period of time.