

Mr. Wally Firth (Northwest Territories): Mr. Speaker, I am most interested in this bill presented by the hon. member for Algoma (Mr. Foster), and I should like to speak in favour of it. At the same time, let me say to this House that I think it is disgraceful that in 1973, in the House of Commons of Canada, the Indian people must have an act passed to give a basic human right. In this day and age this is a disgrace.

I agree in some measure with what the hon. member for Kingston and The Islands (Miss MacDonald) has said, in that this bill perhaps may not be the result of negotiation or consultation with Indian people in this country. To repeat, I think it is a disgrace that a House of Commons act must be passed before the Indian people are given this democratic right.

The Indian people of North America have a terrific democratic system which has been in operation for thousands of years. Some constitutions in this part of the world have adopted ideas from the democratic process enjoyed by the Indian people of the Six Nations. Let me give you an example. One of the largest villages in the Northwest Territories, Fort Rae, has a population of approximately 1,000 to 1,200 Dog Rib Indians. They practice a democratic process from which most of us could learn. This is true not only of elections of chiefs but in respect of the passage of important matters.

The white society does not seem to realize the position of an Indian chief. It is my understanding, having been raised in an Indian village, that the chief is a servant of the people. He does not make decisions on his own and cannot come forward and say things shall be done. He can make decisions only after he has consulted with all his people.

The hon. member for Kingston and The Islands does have a valid point. However, I think at this time it would be silly to delay this matter longer in order to have consultation. This question involves a basic human right of which these people should not be deprived. The Indian people of this country have made many contributions in many areas of society. Pharmaceutical societies in America recognize that there are about 400 drugs used in medicine on the market today that were discovered and first used by the Indian people. I suggest these people can make further contributions to society if given the opportunity.

Canada has the second or third highest standard of living in the world, yet we have a situation in which the Indian and Eskimo peoples are the poorest of all the poor in Canada. We should all work together to remedy that situation. I suggest the Indian people can make further contributions to society if given the opportunity but it is not very easy for them to do so in their present poverty-stricken situation. These people must use their energies in order just to survive.

I commend the hon. member for Algoma for bringing forward this bill. I support it fully, not because I have consulted with the Indian people about this matter but because I know, having been born and raised an Indian, that this is a right of which they have been deprived. I have been an Indian all my life and will remain an Indian. I think the only time one has a true understanding of the feelings of Indians, Eskimos or other peoples is when they learn their language, appreciate their customs, their foods

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and other aspects of their culture. In speaking with 38 years' experience as an Indian, my feeling is that this is an important bill and I call upon members of this House to support it.

Indians have made many contributions in the areas of medicine, democracy, value of life, unity of brotherhood and sports. Perhaps I should give a further example of the democratic process at Fort Rae. When a major decision has to be made, the chief puts the situation to the people. He allows three or four days, or perhaps a week, for every member of the band to express his view before any decision is taken. This puts the chief in the position of being a servant of the people. In many cases he is looked upon as a ruler or a dictator, but the fact is completely the opposite.

I do not intend to take up any more time of the House. I hope hon. members will give their full support to this bill.

Mr. Len Marchand (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a few remarks on this bill. First let me say I am in full agreement with it and believe it should be referred to the committee as soon as possible. I have contacted the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Mr. Chrétien) who has indicated his agreement and that he thinks it is a very good move. I have also contacted the president of the National Indian Brotherhood on an informal basis. He also indicated full agreement and said he would like to see this measure enacted into law.

I know there has been a commitment by the government to consult with Indian people about any major changes in policy and legislation. That commitment still stands. The consultation process is being carried on actively in so far as major policy areas are concerned.

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I feel this is an area in which many young Indian people, as the hon. member for Algoma (Mr. Foster) pointed out, are being denied a basic right. They can vote in provincial and federal elections at age 18 but cannot vote in their own band elections. I know the young people in my home area on the Vernon and Kamloops reserves, including the people in the 12 bands I represent, feel very strongly that they should have the basic right to vote in their own band elections. So this is a very popular issue. It is not one involving a major change to the Indian Act. I believe it is something we could accomplish very quickly in this House.

I should like to give an undertaking to hon. members, including the hon. member for Algoma, that when this matter goes before the committee I shall take it upon myself to see that there is consultation with the National Indian Brotherhood and other organizations across the country in a formal way in order to find out what their views are in respect of such a bill.

After consultation with a number of people, I believe this measure would be a very positive response to enable the young people to take part in the basic democratic process of electing councillors and chiefs of their bands. It seems ludicrous to the young Indian people of 18 years of age and over that they can vote in federal and provincial