

*Indian Affairs*

concurrence in the second report of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development. As chairman of that committee, I would like to spend some time to bring before this House some of the problems and concerns that have been presented to us in our hearings over the last two months and, in particular, those dealing with the subject of aboriginal rights for both status and non-status native peoples.

I think it is fair to say that not a week has passed during this session without some question relating to the native people of Canada being raised in the House. The problems of the native people of James Bay, the Nishga court decision, the question of aboriginal rights, the inadequacies of our present Indian Act and the depressing conditions and circumstances that Canadian natives are forced to live in have all been raised at one time or another. Outside this House, throughout Canada, we have been increasingly hearing the pleas and representations of various native groups, both status and non-status, and those of other concerned citizens, that we correct the injustices that have existed over the past 100 years.

Over the past four weeks we have watched the developments that have taken place at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. To many Canadians this situation is remote and far away. Yet if we listen to Canadian Indians and Eskimos, the grievances voiced at Wounded Knee sound very similar to those voiced here in Canada: recognition of the sovereignty of the Indian people, the enforcement and fulfilment of existing treaties and the restoration of a permanent, non-diminishing land base. For too long we as Canadians have been ignorant or oblivious of the plight of the Indian, the problems that exist and why they are there.

The failure of our economic system to provide justice to our native peoples is accompanied by the failure of our educational and social systems. Until recently almost all our history has portrayed our country's first inhabitants as the ignorant, backward, warring, noble savage. It is with this image that most of us have grown up. But how accurate is it? In the accounts of the early Jesuit missionaries we hear stories of a parental love for children that is unequalled anywhere today. In the testimony and briefs presented to our committee we have been told of a society and culture that far surpasses the idealistic hopes of many today. To give you some idea of how the native peoples of today have viewed their past, I would like to quote from some of the statements that have been made:

We, as Indian people, has a system of collective ownership of land. We felt that land belongs to everybody and that everybody must benefit from those lands. It was the Europeans who, when they occupied this country, introduced individual ownership... (As Indians) we had our own God and our own religion which taught us how to live together in peace. This religion also taught us how to live as a part of the land. We learned how to practice what is now called multiple land use, conservation and resource management. We have much to teach the white man about these things when he is ready to listen.

It is clear that we, the white men, over the past 100 years have failed in dealing with the Indian peoples of Canada. Instead of solving problems that arose in the past, we have created more. However, today in the 1970s we have not only the experience of mistakes to guide us but also many strong status and non-status Indian associations who are committed to solving the present day problems of

[Mr. Buchanan.]

their peoples. I think if there is any significant accomplishment we have made in respect of the Indian people over the last five years, it is the fact that these associations have been encouraged and developed.

I believe a large degree of the salvation of the Indian people will rest with these associations. In recent years these Indian and Inuit associations have been increasingly voicing the position that only the Indian people will be able to bring happiness back into their own lives. And central to this position was, and is, the need to receive a just and fair settlement and the fulfillment of all existing treaties; and for those Indians that were not covered by treaties, for Indians in most of British Columbia, in the Yukon, in Quebec and the Maritimes, and for the Inuit, a just settlement on the question of aboriginal title. For the native peoples, both status and non-status, land is a very essential and necessary ingredient in their way of life. I would like to quote two passages from two separate briefs we received which, again, eloquently demonstrate this fact:

Without land, Indian people have no soul—no life—no identity—no purpose. Control of our own land is necessary for our cultural and economic survival. For Yukon Indian people to join in the social and economic life of Yukon, we must have specific rights to lands and natural resources that will be enough for both our present and future needs.

Then again:

We are people of the land. We have come from the land, and we love the land, but the land is no longer what it was. The land is now a part of the white man's new economy. It is tracked over, marked off, sold and scarred for the minerals and oils that lay beneath it... we are accepting that the land is no longer usable in the old way. We must seek a way to live in the new economy for which our land is being used. We are not seeking a way to sell our land. We are seeking a way to use it in the new way. Our culture does not allow us to sell our land. The land is a part of us, and we are part of the land.

Out of an awareness and concern for the position of Indians and Eskimos in regard to aboriginal rights, and a position of hesitancy on the part of the government, the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development set down its terms of reference quite quickly on this question. I shall read from the first issue of the minutes of proceedings of the committee:

Your subcommittee recommends: that the committee undertake a study of aboriginal rights of the Indian and Eskimo people; that the committee inform the national and major Indian associations across the country of the intention and to hear evidence and receive submissions.

Among some members of the committee, including myself, there was a feeling that under these broad terms of reference, and after a complete and thorough study, we might be able to produce a report that would give the government some concrete guidelines of where and how to move on the question of aboriginal rights. I do not think this was in any way an idealistic thought, because the Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development during the last parliament carried out significant work and made useful recommendations, to which the minister has made reference, in the area of Indian and Eskimo education in Canada.