

*Government Orders*

I indicated in my remarks at second reading that in the provinces of Manitoba and Alberta we were also trying to emulate the process that led to this framework agreement embodied in today's legislation, although it would take a somewhat different form in Manitoba and Alberta. I also indicated that we had already concluded treaty land entitlement agreements with five Alberta First Nations and that we were negotiating with another five. I believe we have in the last three years made more progress on treaty land entitlement than has been made in this entire century in fulfilling those commitments.

Second is the area of a large number of claims called specific claims. The hon. member for The Battlefords—Meadow Lake indicated that specific claims were areas wherein certain legal commitments were made or were thought to have been made by bands at some point in the past and never honoured. A specific claim deals with a particular parcel of land and a particular decision-making process at some time in the past which led to an undertaking, usually in writing, supported and recognized by the band council, usually through a band council resolution wherein it was argued that we did not live up to that commitment.

• (1205 )

It had been a sad truth that our budget of \$15 million a year had not allowed us to move rapidly in the settlement of specific claims. As a result of the new initiative, the budget for a specific claim settlement was increased from \$15 million to approximately \$75 million a year, a quintupling, a fivefold increase in funding.

Whereas we had been able to settle only two or three claims a year prior to 1991, in the first year with the increased funding and by certain technical measures which allow us to fast track the settlement of specific claims, in the most recent year we have now settled between 25 and 30 specific claims across Canada.

With specific claims there is also often a dispute as to whether we have a legal obligation or a lawful obligation or not. Perhaps the Department of Justice says the federal government does not have an obligation, that it is not a legitimate specific claim. First Nations have often been very frustrated because they believe there is a claim.

The traditional position of government was to say take us to court because the Department of Justice believes we will win in court. We have now created a separate commission under the provisions for commissions of inquiry called a Specific Claims Commission, chaired by Mr. Harry Laforme, the chief commissioner, and six other commissioners. It is dealing with these myriad of specific claims across the country where the claimant, the First Nation, believes we have unfairly rejected its claim. We have great hope that the Specific Claims Commission will produce further justice on behalf of those First Nations when they do not feel the Department of Justice is doing justice to their claim.

The third area we call comprehensive claims. Comprehensive claims arise in a territory where the jurisdiction has never been ceded or surrendered or determined by way of a treaty between a population of First Nations people who believe that it was always their traditional territory and the federal and provincial governments that established a legal regime and developed and dispersed land under land titles processed without regard for the aboriginal title or aboriginal interest in those lands.

The major number of remaining comprehensive claims are to be found in British Columbia where we have at least 28 and perhaps more separate comprehensive claims where there were no treaties. There are other cases with the Labrador Inuit and the Innu of Labrador where there were not treaties. In the province of Ontario there is one comprehensive claim which we have agreed to negotiate with the Golden Lake Algonquin people who in fact claim a good part of eastern Ontario under their comprehensive claim.

We have agreed to no longer limit the number of comprehensive claims to five at any one time, which was an earlier policy, and to facilitate as rapidly as we can all of the comprehensive claims in parallel within the financial limitations of Parliament's capacity to settle, but to facilitate negotiations in good faith and not stall people because of the artificial barriers of inadequate financial resources or other legal arguments which may in the past have been convenient ways of delaying the process.

In response to the first question of the hon. member for Labrador I want to say that we are sincerely committed to accelerating claims in all three categories.