

Government Orders

We go a bit beyond that. I would say to the hon. member that we are concerned about a fair and equitable settlement not just for the aboriginal people but for all the people of Canada. We feel we do not just represent one group. We represent all Canadians and we are speaking on behalf of all Canadians when we raise these issues.

She also mentioned that she had concerns about the Reform Party's position, that we were using this debate and it was not specific to this agreement. I agree with her. Obviously we are trying to bring other issues concerning the aboriginal people to light using the format of the debate here today.

We are very concerned about the precedent that one agreement will set. It might be used in future agreements throughout the country and we are using the debate to bring forward some of these other issues. I thank the hon. member for her comments and her questions.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Kilger): It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: The hon. member for Beauport—Montmorency—Orléans, MIL Davie shipbuilding; the hon. member for Portneuf, bilingualism; the hon. member for Frontenac, job creation.

[*English*]

Mr. Elijah Harper (Churchill): Mr. Speaker, I have spoken here a few times. I have made some statements but this is my first speech in the House. I am very honoured to be sent to the Parliament of Canada to represent my constituents, not only the aboriginal people in my area but also many non-aboriginal people.

As an aboriginal person and First Nations member, I have been involved in this discussion for many years both as a chief in my reserve, Red Sucker Lake Band, and also as a member of the Legislative Assembly in Manitoba for well over 11 years. I have committed myself to this process for a very long time. What I find is that I have to repeat myself over and over again many times to get my point across.

When we talk about the aboriginal people we have been here for thousands and thousands of years. We have had governments for thousands of years. We had societies. We had political structures, social structures. We had our own languages. We traded with other nations. In that way we have existed as a nation, as a government in this country. When the first European people or the settlers arrived they were met by the First Nations in this country. They welcomed these people on to the shores of what we call Canada today. Whether it was on the west coast or on the St. Lawrence River we were here; even through Hudson Bay, which I am very familiar with, down to the Nelson River to Winnipeg we welcomed these people.

• (1645)

If it had not been for the kindness and the generosity of our people many of those people would have perished. If the Lord Selkirk settlers had not been helped by Chief Peguis, many of these people would have perished.

What surprises me in this country is the lack of understanding or the ignorance of the history of this country. We see the Canadian Constitution being proposed as supreme law in this country, entrenching in the law of this land the recognition of two founding nations, the French and the English. We know very well that the first people here were the First Nations. Yet your Constitution is based upon the supremacy of God and the rule of law.

There is a myth concerning the Canadian Constitution and the truth. Any constitution should be able to tell the truth, built upon strong foundations that will not crumble but will stand the test of time. The Canadian Constitution never did that. That is why it crumbled, it did not acknowledge the truth and reality in this country.

It was the First Nations that contributed so much to this country by signing treaties. What does it mean when you sign treaties? It means that you enter into an agreement with another nation, in this case the settler people represented by the Queen with our representatives of the First Nations.

There were many pre-Confederation treaties and a number of treaties made in Manitoba and today what are called modern day treaties. Treaties are about establishing relationships. That is what it is all about. As a matter of fact, when we say inherent right to self-government, we are exercising the very authority to sign the treaties. We did not need Parliament to tell us we have treaties. As a matter of fact, there should be a formal recognition by Parliament that we always had the inherent right to self-government. It is not something that can be granted by Parliament or by Canada, because we came to the table as equals. That is what the treaty making process is all about, establishing that.

In that process we shared the land and resources of this country from which many people have benefited all over the world. How generous and how kind we have been to the rest of this country. What kind of benefits have we received so far? Look at the situation in Davis Inlet or in my home at Red Sucker Lake. We have poor housing conditions. We do not have running water. We do have unemployment rates higher than in the cities. I am sure that if unemployment reaches 20 per cent it is a national disaster across the country, but it is 90 per cent in many of these communities. Nobody cries about those kinds of conditions.

All we want is governments to honour and respect the treaties they have signed with us. We do not expect anything more or anything less because we have contributed so much to this great country and we have not benefited at all.