

James Bay Power Project

The task force on the environment which studied this situation last summer also came to the conclusion that the people most deeply affected would no doubt be the Indians.

Mr. Speaker, we are ready because we have been studying the situation very carefully in the last few months. Every time questions were put in the House, I replied that we were following the debate on behalf of the Indian population without directly participating in it, but if the Indians were to request us officially to intervene to safeguard their interests in this debate, we would be ready to do so.

I must say to the House that in the course of the discussions I have had—though unofficially since the Indians were opposed to my involvement in this question—with the premier of Quebec, he has been very understanding and anxious to find a solution that would be acceptable both to Amerindians of that territory as well as to the government of Quebec.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to state once more that we will help Indians to find a negotiated settlement which will be the best thing to do since legal wranglings would certainly not be the best course of action to solve this problem.

At all events, we are going to consult with the Indians and whatever the ultimate decision they ask us to make, we will support them, in accordance with our responsibility to do so under the British North America Act of 1867.

Once again, I hope that the first citizens of the country will not be used in this debate, as has too often been the case, as an all-purpose political football. I think we should show restraint, objectivity and seek out a solution that would first of all benefit the first citizens of this country. Such is certainly our aim. I can assure my hon. friends that I have no other concern and no intention of reverting to the old paternalistic attitude whereby we, white people, should at this time intervene and systematically replace the Indians of New Quebec and James Bay at the negotiation table, speak on their behalf and jointly with them and the government of Quebec, in order to protect their interests in that territory.

[English]

I should like to pay tribute to the Indians of the James Bay area and the Quebec association for their participation in the events leading up to this debate. They have had many meetings with the provincial administration on many different topics. They have acted responsibly. They told my assistant deputy minister this week that what they want is a solution. They do not want to be stubborn; they just want to reconcile their interests, which are vital, with the interests of the Canadian public in general and particularly the citizens of Quebec. I am delighted that we can talk with them and will probably be able to find a solution. I assure them that this government will be there to help them arrive at a negotiated solution. If that does not work and if the Indians decide upon other legal courses of action, we will again be there to help them as it is our responsibility to do.

On behalf of my colleague the Minister of Transport (Mr. Jamieson) I should like for a few minutes to touch upon—

[Mr. Chrétien.]

• (1550)

[Translation]

Navigable Waters Protection Act.

I realize that up to now the government of the province of Quebec has recognized that the Department of Transport has jurisdiction in that field under federal law. And at present—as stated by the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin)—there has been a request for the construction of a bridge on one of the rivers involved. Of course, plans are being worked out for the construction of other bridges on other rivers. The Department of Transport has already sent inspectors in that area so they can get an idea of the work to be done.

Of course, everytime the government of Quebec submits a request to the Department of Transport the minister has assured the House—and I can do it also—that such request will be examined on its merits and according to the letter and the spirit of the law.

This legislation is intended to protect shipping and transportation on those rivers. Naturally, until now they have been very little used by shipping. That is why to this day the Minister of Transport has not had to get very much involved in the building of bridges or wharves on those rivers since they are very little used for navigation and transportation except by Indian canoes.

I think that, in this connection, the Department of Transport has discharged its responsibilities and the Quebec government has admitted the validity of the federal Navigable Waters Protection Act. Besides, this matter has never been disputed by the Quebec authorities and heaven knows how many Quebec rivers such as the Saguenay, the Saint-Maurice, the Ottawa and some others have been the subject of developments and directives from the Department of Transport.

[English]

I do not want to take up too much of the time of this House, Mr. Speaker, but I should like to just state the position of this government. It was only on Monday of this week that the Indians asked us to participate directly in the debate. We have already said to them we will have meetings with the Indian associations and representatives of the James Bay area, and those meetings will be in Ottawa next Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. We are planning to hold meetings whenever it is convenient to them, and we have agreed on Wednesday next as the date for a meeting.

Since Monday, when I received this request, and the resolutions passed by the different bands in the past weeks and months, I got in touch once more with the Quebec government and have been assured that they are willing—

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order. I regret I must interrupt the hon. minister but his time has expired. He must secure the unanimous consent of the House to continue his remarks.

[English]

Is there agreement that the minister be allowed to continue his remarks?