

Senate Committee on Aboriginal Issues. Honourable senators, I believe that such a committee would have an especially important role to play at this point in time. It would provide all of us with a new forum on aboriginal issues, and I stress the word "new". It would provide all aboriginal peoples of Canada with a new forum in which to express their concerns. It would be a forum to develop new approaches, new ideas and new concepts. It would be a new method by which the Senate could address the needs of the aboriginal peoples.

Speaking from my personal experience, honourable senators, I know that the aboriginal peoples must be a part of this country, and that is one of our goals. However, Canada must provide us with a way to succeed in feeling and being a part of this country. Such things as special programs, bilateral negotiations, constitutional reforms and the land claims process all have their place in answering the concerns of the aboriginal peoples. These, however, are not enough because impasse at these forums is unavoidable. I think honourable senators saw an example of this only too clearly a few short weeks ago at the First Ministers' Conference on Aboriginal Rights. I am saying that, when the system stalls or fails, we owe it to the aboriginal peoples and to the entire country to find new ways of dealing with these important issues.

I believe that the Senate must make a meaningful commitment to the aboriginal peoples. The Senate is in a unique position to take a long-term approach on those issues. Most of all, however, the Senate must play a more active role under its special trusteeship responsibility for the aboriginal peoples of this country. This responsibility belongs to the Senate as much as it belongs to any other federal institution.

● (1600)

In order to be effective, the proposed Senate committee will have to deal with a wide range of issues. In addition to social and cultural matters, I would see the committee devoting a good deal of time and effort to questions relating to the political and economic development of the aboriginal peoples. Moreover, it would have to examine the day to day implementation problems at the local level so that the opportunity to develop new approaches and new thinking is not poisoned.

Honourable senators, I believe that such a committee could quickly be put to work exploring such questions as workable models of self-government for aboriginal peoples. Many people in this country do not have a clear understanding of what self-government is all about. One senator from Alberta came to me the other day and said that he did not know what self-government was all about. I can provide that information, as can many of my people. It is just a matter of sitting down and exchanging views and trying to understand the crux of the issue. That is what I believe the Senate can contribute to, and not only contribute to it by way of the establishment of institutions but by passing on information to the general public of Canada. I think we owe that to the general public of Canada. I think that is important if the two nations of this country are to survive. The method of self-government and the mechanisms have to be worked out. I believe that that should be the responsibility of the proposed committee.

We intend to remain in this country, and the problem is not going to disappear. No matter how the system might ignore the needs and cries of our people, the problem will never disappear. Since it will always be here, it is better to try to deal with it now. I have pressured the government, regardless of what government was in power, and have been doing so for the past 15 years.

Some honourable senators might think that I am too close to the problem. That may be so, but I believe that I am also close to the solution. I believe I can contribute to the work of that committee if and when it is struck.

An additional problem arose out of the James Bay/Quebec agreement, to give you an example—a problem which we did not foresee at the time we negotiated and at the time leading up to the convention—and that is the problem of individual versus collective rights under aboriginal self-government. Why is there a problem in that area? It is because there are so many fragmented institutions that cannot get together or work together because the law does not allow them to. That is one reason why the aboriginal peoples have determined to establish self-government, because when there are two sets of institutions in place, one being an ethnic body and one being a public body, there are problems when one gets to individual versus collective rights. That has to be ironed out. If the James Bay/Quebec agreement is to be used as a model right across the country, there will be problems. Before those problems get too big, I think we should deal with them.

Additional areas I feel should be examined by the proposed Senate committee are alternatives to the current extinguishment policy and land claims approach. Again, if I were to try to outline to you what those alternatives mean, you would only be hearing my side of the story, but I should like to have this proposed committee in place so it can enjoy the same understanding I have as to the current extinguishment policy. There are alternatives.

Perhaps some might ask why we need land claims settlements. Well, if there are no land claims settlements, how does one deal with land claims.

Finally, honourable senators, I am aware that the creation of new committees may well burden the Progressive Conservative members of the Senate with still more duties. However, I would like to state that the proposed committee would be small, and I would also stress the non-partisan nature of the issues it would be dealing with. I believe the Progressive Conservative Party has one or two senators they could name to this committee, but that will be up to them. I know we can put together a committee to study aboriginal issues.

**Hon. Martial Asselin:** Senator Frith will fix that.

**Senator Watt:** I appreciate that.

In closing, honourable senators, I call upon you to give unanimous consent to my motion to establish a Special Committee of the Senate on Aboriginal Issues.

On motion of Senator Frith, debate adjourned.