

In the case of the second principle in this bill—the right of the bands to control their own membership—it has come under equally heavy criticism for arbitrarily imposing a potential of many thousands of persons back into the bands. I think it is fair to say that a majority of the witnesses attacked this provision on many grounds. It was contrary to basic treaty rights. It threatened the already precarious economic survival of the bands. It offended the whole concept of self-government. It threatened the cultural and spiritual roots of community living which individual groups have struggled to maintain against incredible odds. In some cases the bands simply did not want the women and their children back at all, as they had chosen to marry out and that was that.

In terms of Bill C-31, the Constitution and the Charter, many reject totally any attempt by the federal government to interfere with the right of Indians to determine their citizenship and their right of residence on Indian land. Indeed, the very first group to appear before us, headed by Mr. Eric Robinson, Co-ordinator of the Manitoba Brotherhood of Indian Nations, who was speaking for the Coalition of First Nations, stated bluntly:

If the Government of Canada is adamant in its pursuit of this legislation, we can only inform you that your government and our First Nations governments who make up the coalition, are on a collision course, a course that will lead not only to defiance on the part of the people and the governments of the Coalition of First Nations, but to possible conflict if this legislation is passed.

From the Treaty Six Chiefs Alliance, Chief Gordon Gadwa told us:

We will not accept legislation which will impose people upon our communities without our consent.

He added:

We see indigenous peoples as a people identifying with a particular culture, a particular community and a particular value system. For us, people left our community by choice. They may racially look like Indians, but are they Indians?

● (2110)

The so-called "high impact" bands also have a deep concern. These are bands which have a small population and area which could, in their view, be overwhelmed by even a small number of reinstated members. In Alberta, I have heard people scoff at some of these bands. These are bands which have had the good fortune to have a resource base discovered on their land. There is a tendency to say either that they can easily afford newcomers, or that they want to restrict newcomers in order to avoid additional claims on band revenue. Surely bands which have prospered, thanks to good management and resource discovery, have no less a desire to maintain the way of life and customs which they have built up in their communities. To quote Catherine Twinn, Counsel to the Treaty 8 Bands of Alberta:

[Senator Fairbairn.]

In its rush to correct past injustices, Parliament must ensure that its actions will not jeopardize the survival of any Indian community.

Honourable senators, I have gone on at some length about the views expressed to our committee, because a number of them are not reflected in Bill C-31.

The government has addressed difficult issues in what Mr. Crombie believes is the fairest way to reach specific and limited objectives. He acknowledges that the result does not satisfy any of the constituent groups. Indeed, he suggested that, if it did, he would have failed to achieve the limited balance he had been seeking.

We must also acknowledge the tremendous amount of time, effort and thought which Indians across this country have brought to this debate. Their presentations to committees, both in the House of Commons and in the Senate, were outstanding and really reached far beyond this single bill to the larger issue of self-government which will dominate future discussions in this country.

I know that the government will not be moved on the basic principles contained in this bill. That has been made very clear to us. Nonetheless, even at this late date, there are still avenues to explore when we meet the minister in committee, as I hope we will.

One which I have not touched upon, but which is of vital concern, is the question of financial assistance to the Indians bands. The minister, thus far, has not wished to put a price tag on his principles, but I ask him to give us and the Indians a clear picture of the range of the government's commitment before the bill goes to third reading.

Time and again, witnesses demanded that the bill contain a guarantee that necessary resources would be forthcoming. Indeed, the negative attitude of some towards reinstatement might have been somewhat muted by such a guarantee. For some, the desperate conditions on their reserves gave them no option but to oppose.

With respect, the Indian people are not about to accept with blind faith assurances from the minister that they will be no worse off as a result of this bill, and why should they? I, personally, find it difficult, especially after we had a peek at the leaked documents from Deputy Prime Minister Erik Nielsen's Task Force on cost-cutting, which recommended substantial cuts in native programs over the next three years. To be fair, the minister and the Prime Minister denied that the document represented government policy. However, its very existence and the attitude expressed in it indicates a way of thinking within government departments that justifies concern, if not cynicism.

We are in a period of restraint, of deficit cutting, of pulling back and of shifting from government to the private sector. Let us be perfectly clear that none of that philosophy must—indeed none of it can—apply to the Indian people, either in terms of regular government financial assistance or certainly as a consequence of this bill.