

I just had the opportunity of participating in the discussion in the aboriginal affairs committee. The minister of Indian affairs appeared before the committee to outline his role in the settlement of land issues.

In talking about aboriginal families and communities one cannot separate those issues from land issues because that culture is fundamentally rooted in its attachment to the land. Its whole way of life and of viewing the world is attached to the land. We cannot separate these issues.

This is a situation in which the minister of Indian affairs is on the verge of introducing legislation in this House to create the Nunavut territory and settle the outstanding Inuit claims. All of us welcome the fact that those rights will finally be recognized and that a resolution of those issues is coming.

At the same time, the minister today took the position that the Dene people of northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba will be shut out of this process. These are families that from time immemorial to this very day have spent a good part of their time and made a good part of their livelihood from lands that are included in that settlement area.

This has been documented all the way back to Samuel Hearne. At his first point of contact he found Dene people in those areas. There has been continuous use and occupancy. It was only after the policy began of moving Indian families to where schools and missions were that people did not continuously live in those territories.

Now the minister of Indian affairs says that if those families want to continue to exercise their treaty rights in that area he as the trustee is not going to do anything to help them. Instead, he is saying that these communities are going to have to go to the Supreme Court to exercise the rights that he is supposed to be protecting.

The minister is saying that families in those communities who are suffering from tuberculosis, malnourishment, alcohol abuse and a hopeless economic situation are going to have to take funds they should be using to meet their basic human needs in order to fight the minister in the courts. It is very hard to reconcile the minister's words with his actions when one sees cases like that.

Supply

As well, we have recently become very conscious of the whole question of suicide among aboriginal youth. It is very ironic in the international year of indigenous people that Canada's contribution to this whole discussion on the role of aboriginal people should lead off with the tragedy of Davis Inlet and the tragic situation of the young people there.

That is no different than what is happening in Big Cove or in the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation in northwestern Ontario. It is no different than what is happening in Fox Lake in Alberta or in Stanley Mission in Saskatchewan.

There is an epidemic of suicide in this country among aboriginal youth. But at the same time this is going on we are on the international stage saying that Canada is playing an exemplary role in the way it is treating aboriginal families.

• (1915)

It is quite ironic that in the very year we are doing that, on virtually a daily basis, we are being confronted with the fact that this is not the truth at all.

Another issue that I would like to raise is the situation of the Métis people in this country. In many ways the Métis people are the forgotten people of this land. They are the product of the interaction that happened between the European and aboriginal peoples at their first point of contact, which was the fur trade.

They evolved a way of life, a distinct culture and a unique language, which resulted in the Métis people being very central to the formation of the province of Manitoba in 1870. Indeed it was just one year ago today that this House very belatedly passed a resolution recognizing the role of Louis Riel in creating the province of Manitoba and thus contributing to the fundamental development of Canada.

It is timely that we again examine the role of the Métis people because when we look historically at what happened at the point of contact and what evolved out of it, the Métis nation, an argument can be made that in fact the Métis nation is central to the Canadian identity. The Métis have been the agents of change. They are the ones who best exemplify the issues that are involved in the contact between European and other cultures and the aboriginal people of this country.