

Government Orders

Although Canada has a vision of what it would like to see at the end of the day, there is no prescription to define this new relationship. It will be built on a process, that trust I talked about, the respect I talked about. That will be negotiated by the three parties: the First Nations, Canada and British Columbia.

The fundamental elements of Canada's vision for post-treaty B.C. include certainty, equity and finality, practical arrangements, and opportunities for economic development. That is very important because our First Nations are striving to build their communities. They are striving to be more independent, but that independence can only come if there is economic opportunity and development, if native people can forge their design and abilities around economic development and make their communities more productive. That would give the independence and self-reliance which is so important for our First Nations people.

We have to make sure that the vision is workable, efficient and cost effective with these governance arrangements. What we will see in this vision at the end of the day are healthier First Nations. Nobody wants that more than the First Nations people themselves.

Last, we want more harmonious relations and better neighbours. That goes without saying. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to speak on Bill C-107 and, obviously, very pleased to support it.

• (1645)

Mr. John Finlay (Oxford, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a new member of the aboriginal affairs and northern development committee, I am pleased to rise and speak on Bill C-107, an act respecting the establishment of the British Columbia Treaty Commission.

The B.C. treaty commission will be charged with the task of facilitating treaty negotiations, including the implementation of the inherent right to self-government. The bill will help all of us to understand something of the complexity involved in this process and something of the patience that is required. It will also help us to understand what that elusive phrase "inherent right to self-government" means.

Self-government will be dealt with at the same treaty table as other items such as land and resources. The same principles and practices of openness which currently characterize the B.C. treaty making process will also apply to self-government negotiations.

The federal government will not establish additional processes. These negotiations will be with the aboriginal groups that are involved in the existing treaty process in B.C. As the act outlines, the current chief federal negotiators who work out of the federal treaty negotiation office will represent Canada in self-government negotiations.

The budgets allocated for the B.C. treaty making process and managed by the treaty commission will support self-government negotiations.

It is federal government policy to implement the inherent right of aboriginal people to self-government and it will focus on reaching practical and workable agreements on how self-government will be exercised. Rather than trying to define it in abstract terms or through lengthy and costly litigation, while there are different views about the nature, scope and content of the inherent right, negotiations among governments and aboriginal peoples are preferred over litigation. Consultation and co-operation, not confrontation.

It seems to be without cause for any contradiction that in our modern society, and perhaps because we tend to follow practices from south of the border, that we are becoming less and less able, sometimes in government and civic affairs and interpersonal relationships too, to sit down and solve some of these problems without the help of high priced lawyers and legal experts. We could give many examples of the increasing cost of this sort of thing. Many of us have had first hand experience of that. I applaud the thrust of this bill.

Given the different circumstances of aboriginal peoples, implementation of the inherent right cannot be uniform, nor will it result in a one size fits all form of self-government. There are 625 First Nations in Canada and I am sure we would find at least 450 different interpretations of what the inherent right means, depending on whether these are the Crees of northern Quebec or the members of Walpole Island or the Sechelt in B.C. Therefore there are 625 negotiations to be completed.

It would do us well to remember that for 200 years we have treated our aboriginal people in a paternalistic way. They see themselves as occupiers of this land before our ancestors arrived. They see themselves as people who agreed in a peaceful way to share that land with us. All too often our answer, when they were outnumbered, was to ignore them completely and push them on to the poorest land we could find and call it a reserve.

• (1650)

Self-government arrangements will be tailored to meet the unique needs of aboriginal groups and will be responsive to their particular political, economic, legal, historical, cultural and social circumstances.

The inherent right of self-government immediately does not include a right of sovereignty in the international law sense and will not result in sovereign, independent aboriginal nation states. On the contrary, implementation of self-government should enhance the participation of aboriginal people in Canadian federation and ensure that aboriginal peoples and their governments do not exist in isolation, separate and apart from the rest of society.