

progress of their strategy. They have initiated discussions on many aspects of Indian affairs with the Quebec government. They have said all along that they wanted me to wait, to be ready to intervene when the time came. I have respected this wish.

The Indians have, of course, passed resolutions, and so on. I overheard the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) talking about a resolution passed last July. It is true that a petition was signed last July, but I tell the hon. member and the House of Commons that it was only on Monday that the association sent me officially a copy of this petition and asked me to take part in the debate.

Mr. Nielsen: They asked you last July.

Mr. Chrétien: No, Sir. They passed the resolution last July but they decided not to send it to me. They decided they ought to work among themselves before making up their minds what they should do. In the meantime we have looked into the situation carefully. We recognize that it is a serious one. I said in the House when questioned this week that now the Indians have officially requested my help I am happy to offer them my assistance. They have asked me to meet them next week and I have agreed to do so.

Since the beginning of this affair I have discussed the situation three or four times with Mr. Bourassa, Premier of Quebec. I have been in touch with him this week and asked him for a meeting after the Indians meet with me next week. He said any time I want to meet him in connection with this matter he will be happy to discuss it with me. So we have been available. We are willing to help the Indians find a solution.

What will be the best solution for them? This week my assistant deputy minister, Mr. Ciaccia, had a discussion with Chief DeLisle and the representative of the Indians in the James Bay area, Chief Billy Diamond. They had a long talk on technical questions and the course to be taken. This will be followed up in the course of my meeting with the Indians next week. But I wish to repeat that I shall not decide for the Indians. I think the Indians should be left to make a choice, and I will be there to help them. They are well organized at the present time and they want a piece of the action.

Apparently members of the New Democratic Party and others are asking me to take over in a paternalistic way and stop certain things or do certain things for the Indians. I will not do that, because this government does not wish to take over responsibilities which the Indians themselves are willing to discharge.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Chrétien: We are not paternalistic toward the Indian people but, as I say, we are willing to help them. There are two courses open. There is a solution which could be negotiated. The Indians would like us to help them. They have tried alone and they have not been completely satisfied. Now they say the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development can help them. Fine. I am ready to help them. I will sit down with them and I will meet the Premier of Quebec to discuss the problems of the 6,000 Indians who could be affected by this development. It is

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my duty to do so under the terms of section 91(24) of the British North America Act and, as usual, I shall discharge my duty—but not at the expense of the self-respect, pride and wishes of the Indians of this area.

• (1540)

[Translation]

The problem, Mr. Speaker, is extremely complicated because it is common knowledge that the lands in question in the James Bay area have not always belonged to the Quebec government and have not always been under its jurisdiction. These lands, formerly known as Rupert's Land, belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company and, in 1867, the Canadian government, in a petition addressed to Her Majesty, asked the Imperial government to hand over Rupert's Land to the government of Canada.

It is in 1870 that Rupert's Land was actually handed over by the Imperial government of Her Majesty to become part of the Canadian confederation. For several years, this land was administered by the federal government and in 1898, the southern part of the Rupert's Land was transferred by the federal government to the province of Quebec.

The northern part was in effect transferred in 1912 under the transfer act of that same year, in which it was stated that the interests of Indians were to be protected if the area came to be developed, as has been mentioned by the hon. member for Kootenay West (Mr. Harding) who spoke for the New Democratic party.

We are quite aware of the judicial aspect of the situation in this area, and we firmly intend to protect the interests of Indians.

Does this mean, however, that in order to protect the interests of the Indians, we must act irresponsibly? The Indians recognize the complexity of this situation. They themselves are trying to discover what solution could best serve their interests.

This is why they asked me a few days ago to meet with them in order to clarify this matter, and we will meet with them next Wednesday to try and make some progress. Economic progress does not necessarily exclude the reaching of a reasonable agreement between the parties concerned.

I think the Quebec government should recognize that it is in the interest of all Quebecers to see to it that a development of this kind will not cause irreparable prejudice to Indians, and that the people who must be the first to benefit from this development should be the Indians who have been living in this territory from times immemorial.

I think it is possible to ensure that some agreement is reached which will be satisfactory to all parties concerned. Of course, the judicial situation cannot be shrugged away. It is indeed an extremely complex situation which involves various concepts. However, studies have been made on this subject by independent commissions. We are all familiar with the report of the Dorion Commission, which also recognizes that the Indian problem is important to the economic and social development of this whole area.