

Government Orders

create a better climate for investment and economic growth. This is a reality that cannot be denied.

Treaties will provide a land base for aboriginal people and with it a foundation upon which to build self-sufficient communities. This will allow aboriginal people to become involved in a range of economic activities that in the absence of a land base have been foreclosed to them. Commercial activities like mining, forestry, and tourism become far more possible to be pursued by First Nations. And the growth of strong, self-reliant, economically vibrant aboriginal communities strengthens us all, because it will bring positive economic spillover into non-aboriginal communities.

• (1220)

For too long the aboriginal people of B.C. have been denied both their legal rights from the past and their hopes for the future. For too long they have suffered high rates of unemployment, low rates of literacy, and high rates of infant mortality and suicide. For too long we have denied ourselves the contribution they can make.

This situation cannot be defended and it must not continue. With rights and obligations clearly defined by treaties, all British Columbians, aboriginals and non-aboriginals, will be able to get on with realizing the potential of the province and expanding their opportunities for advancement.

This will be good news for the forest workers and the miners. It will mean an expanded tax base as the infusion of settlement funds stimulates economic activity and creates jobs. It will also mean lower social costs associated with the poverty and unemployment in aboriginal communities. It will mean the end of conflict and costly litigation and the beginning of co-operation and negotiation.

These historic issues will not go away. They cannot be wished away. As long as the issues remain unresolved, investment will stay away and the jobs that must be created will go elsewhere. The spiral will continue: uncertainty creating fewer opportunities and fewer opportunities creating more social problems. The cycle of poverty and dependence will continue.

These issues must be dealt with. We have a choice as to how we are going to do that. We can litigate at great expense to the Canadian taxpayer, knowing that at the end of this long, drawn out and often bitter process a court is likely to tell us to work out the details ourselves—something very similar to the negotiation process we have now—or we can negotiate directly from the outset.

Surely it makes good economic sense to avoid costly court battles, which cast each party in the role of antagonist. It makes good sense to instead approach these issues as partners, prepared to give and take in the spirit of trust and mutual respect.

Yes, there are real economic benefits in proceeding with treaties in B.C., but at the end of the day the most important benefit will not be felt in terms of dollars and cents; it will be felt in the lives of the individuals as they are given the opportunity to contribute further to the greatness of Canada.

The benefits of holding a job cannot always be measured by points on a graph. Having a job is really about hope. It means having the ability to plan for the future in order to realize your own potential and advance your family. It means having the pride of contributing to the overall health of one's community. Is it better to leave things in a state of confusion or to sit down with our aboriginal colleagues and establish certainty?

Perhaps it is expecting too much to hope that the Reform Party's vision of Canada is broad enough to include the first peoples, generous enough to expand the circle of opportunity, or far sighted enough to see the wisdom in finally completing this great unfinished business of our history. Surely it is not expecting too much to ask the Reform Party to take a hard headed look at the economics of treaty negotiations and admit that it makes real sense. Surely we can see the awful price we are paying for uncertainty. Surely even they can see the benefits of negotiating instead of litigating.

• (1225)

I ask that the Reform Party and all other parties in the House join us in helping to close the chapter of frustration and fear and help us to write a new one of understanding and opportunity. Let us finally complete the work our forebears began.

Mr. Elijah Harper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am humbled to be here in the House to speak in Parliament where the laws are made. This is the supreme lawmaking body of the country, based on the principles of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which says "based on the principles of the supremacy of God and the rule of law". We as aboriginal people, the first inhabitants of this country, have always known that.

We are now debating once again what has been debated for years and years: land. The first order of business has not been concluded with the First Nations, the first inhabitants.

The creator created all nations all over the world, created land, the trees, the environment we live in today. It so happens that he placed the aboriginal people in this country. Canada is an aboriginal word meaning community.