

I thank the minister for the statement he has made. There was a reminiscent tone to it. I recall during the last years of administration under the leadership of the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) that a joint committee studied this issue. The wording of the report of that committee dealt with the winds of change which were blowing through the ranks of the Indian people of Canada. Many of the thoughts which the minister expressed in his statement were good thoughts, repeating the thoughts in the report of the committee.

We welcome the statement by the minister. It amounts to an acceptance of many proposals made by the Indian people through the years, and made by those who have worked on their behalf, in this party and elsewhere. As the minister made clear, it is only a statement of position and to a degree a statement of a bargaining position. There are a lot of "ifs" and a lot of implications. I am not offering carping criticism about this, Mr. Speaker, because the extent to which this will be successful will depend on the full understanding and knowledge of the problems which lie ahead that must be overcome.

There are at least two major constitutional questions. First, there is the question concerning an agreement of the provinces to assume the responsibility referred to. Clearly the provinces will not agree unless they also receive resources adequate to their responsibility. Clearly the provinces have not agreed and apparently have not been asked to agree. We must express the hope that the minister, by making his statement now, has not introduced an aspect of ultimatum and inflexibility which would complicate the transfer.

The second constitutional question concerns giving effect to any changes. An amendment would be required in due course to the British North America Act and we can only assume that the minister has some reason to believe that agreement could be reached on such an amendment. We hope this will be the case.

There is also bound to be apprehension among some of the Indian people. While the Indian Act and the federal authority have been unpopular, they have also been familiar. Their proposed removal will raise questions and concern about Indian lands and other rights. In some cases the Indian people may not welcome the prospect of having to rely upon provincial authorities. I note that the

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minister intends to establish what he calls a "unit of senior personnel", to deal with the Indian people and others on the problems of implementation. It is essential that those members of this unit which deal with the Indian people comprise persons whom the Indian people feel they can trust. It would be foolish and harmful to overlook the very real suspicions with which many Indian people now regard officials of the department.

I note also that the minister now intends further consultations with the Indian people. I was sorry that he did not refer to the representative committee established by the last Indian consultative meeting here in Ottawa, which sought federal financial assistance in order to carry out consultations of their own. I hope this omission does not mean that the minister intends to bypass this group, which was specifically chosen by an able and representative meeting of the Indian people.

There is bound to be some contention about aspects of the statement. For instance, many provinces might be reluctant to accept the proposal if the federal government would in time withdraw financial contribution to the provinces. That proposal amounts to simply transferring responsibilities without revenues.

The statement involves what would seem to be a limited interpretation of existing treaty rights, and a reluctance to deal with specific claims of aboriginal rights. There are bound to be some very serious problems about who has the right to be consulted and the fulness of the consultation. By and large this must be regarded as a welcome statement and a step forward toward equality for the Indian people of Canada. We assume it is proposed in good faith and not merely as a bargaining instrument.

• (2:20 p.m.)

It would be callous gamesmanship and a very real tragedy if this statement had any other inspiration than a genuine attempt to help the Indian people of Canada. We in this party assume that that is its intention, and we are prepared to help the government achieve the general goals which are outlined. I would hope that the matter would be referred at an early date to a standing committee of the House of Commons in order that the response of the provinces and of the Indian people involved can be known by the whole of parliament and taken as a guide to our action in the future.