

Yorkton—Melville in the *Melville Advance*: “Nobody even talked about it for 20 years and suddenly we’re asking how did this ever come to be”. That is quite unlike the position put forward by his party colleagues who just spoke.

• (1045)

This is a very important bill and it is long overdue. However, the understanding should be that we are now at this stage and we should move forward on it. Today marks the culmination of a long and at times very difficult struggle. It is born of British Columbia’s unique history. It is the product of many years of hard work and goodwill.

Fairness, clarity and justice are not issues of party politics; they are elements of principles we all share as Canadians. Over the decades many people have played a part: people from various parties and political ideologies; people who share little in common except a desire to see justice done and to get on with building a brighter future for British Columbia.

To understand why in 1995 we are still talking about negotiating treaties, we need to look at our history. Unlike most other provinces, where treaties were signed to clarify jurisdiction over land and resources and to forge new relationships between First Nations and the newcomers to this great land, few treaties were ever concluded in British Columbia. As a result, some 124 years after becoming a province the key questions of unextinguished aboriginal claims and rights remain unresolved and the majority of the province remains subject to outstanding aboriginal land claims.

Few treaties were signed because of the position historically taken by the Government of British Columbia. From the late 1800s the position was that aboriginal rights had been extinguished prior to B.C.’s entry into Confederation in 1871, or if these rights did exist they were the exclusive responsibility of the federal government. In 1990, under the leadership of Premier Vander Zalm, of the Social Credit Party, B.C. reversed its longstanding position and the way was open to resolving these issues.

It is only fair to point out that one of the key players in convincing the provincial government to reverse its historical opposition to negotiating treaties was the B.C. minister of native affairs at the time, Mr. Jack Weisgerber. I know that many of my Reform Party friends will recognize Mr. Weisgerber’s name. One of the early and enthusiastic architects of this process, Mr. Weisgerber now leads the provincial Reform Party in British Columbia.

Following on the heels of the B.C. government’s decision, the Government of Canada and the B.C. government acted quickly to advance this process. Later that same year the federal minister of Indian and northern affairs, the Hon. Tom Siddon, along with Mr. Weisgerber and Bill Wilson, chairman of the First Nations Congress, agreed to establish a task force to make

recommendations on the mandate and process for treaty negotiations.

By June of 1991 the B.C. claims task force had released its report. One of its key recommendations was the creation of the arm’s length B.C. Treaty Commission. In the ten months that followed, representatives of Canada, B.C., and the First Nations Summit negotiated the British Columbia Treaty Commission agreement, which was the blueprint for the commission.

On September 21, 1992, the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Hon. Brian Mulroney, Indian affairs minister Tom Siddon, and B.C. Premier Mike Harcourt and native affairs minister Andrew Petter joined with the First Nations Summit leadership in signing the B.C. Treaty Commission agreement. In the three years since, the commission has made great progress. To date, 47 First Nations groups, representing over 70 per cent of British Columbia’s aboriginal peoples, have submitted statements of intent to negotiate. In the agreement creating the treaty commission was the commitment to establish it in legislation. In May 1993 both the aboriginal summit and the province fulfilled their part of that commitment. Now the time has come for the federal government to honour its part of the bargain.

• (1050)

These are the events that have led us to this legislation and this debate. Across the years and across party lines people have joined in a common cause. It is their vision and determination that we celebrate and formalize today. Their cause was simple: the desire to bring justice to the aboriginal people and certainty to their province.

A Price Waterhouse study prepared in 1990 estimated that \$1 billion in investment had not occurred because of unresolved claims. Since the time of that study the price has continued to be paid, year in and year out. Some 300 badly needed jobs have not been created and \$125 million in capital investments have not been made. That has been the price of denying the problem or pretending that it would go away. That is the price of the status quo for the people of British Columbia. It is a price we can no longer afford. With the passage of this legislation, we will no longer have to pay it.

If the price of inaction has been high for the general population of British Columbia, for aboriginal people it has been far higher. For aboriginal people it has meant great hardships and poverty. It has meant the denial of historic rights and future hopes. It has meant generations of dreams deferred and promises unkept. It has meant a quality of life few in the House can imagine and none of us should have to tolerate.

Aboriginal socioeconomic conditions are appalling. Almost one third of aboriginal homes on reserves lack running water. Diseases such as hepatitis and tuberculosis, virtually eradicated in the non-native population, persist in aboriginal communities. Deaths from fires are three and a half times the non-aboriginal level because of unsafe housing and lack of proper sanitation. The suicide rate among aboriginal people is 50 per cent higher