

As the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Clark) mentioned earlier, one of the great debates we had in the past dealt with whether this was a women's issue or an Indian issue. I believe the Minister covered the matter very, very well and indicated that it is really both. I do not think there is any question about that. The attitude of the previous Government depended, I suppose, on who was appearing before the committee. The former Minister of State for Mines, the Hon. Judy Erola, insisted that it was entirely a women's issue and not an Indian issue.

Mr. Rodriguez: We know what happened to her.

Mr. McDermid: I know what happened to her. The Hon. Member who defeated her keeps reminding me of what happened to her. I thank him for that, although my memory is not that short.

That was one of the problems with which we were faced the last time we dealt with this issue. That understanding did not exist at that time. It was very difficult for those of us who had spent a considerable amount of time on the issue to try to educate those who were pulling the strings as to exactly what the issues were. In all fairness, I think that the former Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development understood the problems but did not have the necessary clout or power within Cabinet to make the amendments to the Bill that the present Minister has been able to make. I think we must also commend the Minister for his work at that end.

I wish to congratulate the Minister. I would also like to congratulate the Government for bringing this Bill before the House. In conversations we had earlier today, the Minister assured me that there will be a fair hearing given to this issue at committee and that the committee will delve into the Bill to a great extent. The committee is looking forward to getting its work done. If I am not mistaken, I believe that there is an agreement that as of today, the Bill will be referred to the standing committee so that the committee can get under way with its very, very important and necessary work on Bill C-31.

May I close, Mr. Speaker, by once again appealing to all those associated with this Bill to come before the committee with open minds and a clear feeling of consensus in their hearts so that together, in a non-political way, we can remove this very distasteful part of our history and rectify it as best we can. Although the remedy will not be perfect, we can at least make a very, very honest and good attempt.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): Are there questions or comments? Since there are no questions or comments, I recognize the Hon. Member for Kamloops-Shuswap (Mr. Riis).

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops-Shuswap): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate having this opportunity to rise to say a few words regarding Bill C-31. I recognize that my colleague and other Hon. Members would like to say a few words. Therefore, I will keep my comments brief.

Having listened to the debate today and having heard from all parts of the House some very positive, powerful, thoughtful,

Indian Act

compassionate and co-operative statements, I feel that this has been one of the days when I have been really proud to be a Member of this House. I listened to the spokespersons from all three political Parties indicate that this was indeed a very historic day for bringing justice to native people and for removing from our books a discriminatory clause in the Indian Act. The very thoughtful and constructive comments that individuals have made have put this particular Bill into a very appropriate context.

I am sure all of us are looking forward to examining the Bill clause by clause when it gets to committee. We are looking forward to scrutinizing every aspect of this Bill and to ensuring that the various groups will have an opportunity to have their concerns registered and, wherever reasonable and possible, to have their recommendations incorporated through amendments to this Bill.

I am very happy to say a few words today on this Bill. When I first became a Member of Parliament, within a matter of hours every Indian band in my constituency arranged a visit with me. As well as the major issue of self-government, they reminded me of the concerns that they had with Section 12(1)(b). Over time, 12(1)(b) has become a phrase with which I am very comfortable. I suppose it has almost come to symbolize this incredible Act called the Indian Act.

One of the previous speakers referred to the Indian Act as being a leaky ship with all kinds of rust and holes, a ship that is literally falling apart. It is almost impossible to save that ship. The only way to save it is to introduce self-government for Indian people. Today we are simply trying to plug one more hole in anticipation of the Act being thrown out as soon as possible to be replaced with Indian self-government.

This Bill deletes membership sections of the Indian Act which discriminate on the basis of sex. It reinstates people who lost status through marriage to a non-Indian or through the double-mother clause which took away status from Indians whose mother and whose father's mother were not status Indians. It reinstates people who lost status through enfranchisement of the husband or father, through the dispute of the status of the father in cases of illegitimate children, through enlistment in Canada's Armed Forces, through obtaining or maintaining employment, through attendance at a university or through the attainment of a professional degree. It also provides that first-generation children be granted status as Indians under federal law and that they would then be eligible for band membership according to rules developed by the band. It sets out a method by which the band can design and control membership criteria. It sets out a system of protest for people disputing a decision regarding the addition or deletion from the band list and gives band councils the power to decide residency rights.

The Hon. Member for Cowichan-Malahat-The Islands (Mr. Manly) indicated very clearly that one of the concerns we must address is the funding provisions for reinstated band members. We must address the incredible pressure this change may place on certain bands in terms of expanded membership, available land and the additional cost that will obviously have