

James Bay Power Project

ly, Mr. Bennett, Premier of British Columbia, decided that there must be development of two rivers in that province, the Columbia River and the Peace River. This proposal was objected to by the Hon. Davie Fulton who was minister of justice in the government led by the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker). The proposal was rejected. Then the government changed.

In the new government the then secretary of state for external affairs, now government leader in the Senate, being determined to pull off a coup and produce Mr. Bennett at Washington for the signing of a treaty, permitted, nay, encouraged, the government of British Columbia to proceed with the power construction program involving the two rivers. He encouraged the province of British Columbia to build a dam across the Peace River without requesting the consent which was essential and should have been obtained under the Navigable Waters Protection Act.

At that time I was the only member of the House who was aware of the problem. I challenged the minister of justice of the day and finally, after much questioning, obtained an admission to the effect that the Navigable Waters Protection Act applied, that permission had to be obtained for construction and that application had to be made. At that time the Department of Public Works was responsible in the House for that legislation. For two years I pursued this question with the Liberal government and got nowhere.

Finally, the dam was constructed. Irreparable damage was suffered by the lower parts of the Peace River and particularly the Athabasca-Peace River delta, and no one can be certain as to the consequences to the Mackenzie River basin. The Minister of the Environment admits this. In a press release dated February 17, 1971, we find the following statement:

Mr. Davis said that preliminary hydrological studies indicate that filling of the Williston reservoir, created by the construction of the Bennett dam in B.C., appears in part responsible for reduced water levels in Lake Athabasca and ecological changes in the Athabasca delta.—

Ecologists say that a continuation of low water levels in the Athabasca delta may permanently change the vegetation and in turn the animal life. They say that it is especially necessary that high-level flood flows cover the delta not later than the spring of 1972, in order to avoid permanent ecological changes.

I thoroughly agree with that statement. I was in that area recently, and we do not know what will happen. I only hope there will not be permanent damage. The government cannot avoid its responsibilities. The waters I am talking about come squarely within the definition of navigable waters under the act. One of the last cases I was involved in before coming to this House concerned a narrow creek not wider than the aisle which separates the front benches of this House. In that case, a fisherman seeking to go from his home to Lesser Slave Lake was compelled to travel through the waters of that stream which crossed the land of a farmer. The farmer built a fence across the stream. Officials of the federal Department of Public Works in Edmonton instituted an action, secured an injunction and ultimately a judgment for damages. The farmer concerned was compelled to take down the fence.

[Mr. Baldwin.]

Without doubt, the definition of navigable rivers and navigable waters as interpreted by the Exchequer Court of this country makes it clear that such rivers and waters are covered by this legislation. Nobody in the government has told us what the government's intentions are regarding the navigable waters in question. I hope, and I will give the government credit in this regard, until the contrary appears that these projects will not be allowed to proceed until the corporation of the province of Quebec charged with responsibility files plans and those plans have been examined in detail by competent and responsible engineers, so that the results which will flow from the proposed changes to the rivers will be acceptable.

• (1530)

That is the plea I am making. I could be much more critical, but I think this is the time for plain speaking. This is the time to urge upon the government the view of the vast majority of people in this country, namely, that when governments and powerful corporations become involved in vast public works undertakings, every precaution must be taken to ensure that the kind of irreparable damage we have experienced in the Peace River area is not perpetrated in other parts of Canada.

I urge the government to take this plea to heart. If they do not, I assure them that as long as they sit on the other side of the House they will have to deal with a determined opposition and, I am sure, with a determined people in this land.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, I was in no hurry to rise but clearly the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) wants to speak after me, so I am not in the least embarrassed, quite the opposite. I do not evade committees or the House. I can face the situation as it is.

I welcome the opportunity for us to take part in this debate which is extremely important, particularly so for a certain group of Canadian citizens, the Indians of the James Bay area. In fact, it is gratifying for me to be able to clarify the matter and to give a detailed explanation of the situation of the Indians now facing this problem.

First of all, I refer to the point raised by the hon. member who spoke on behalf of the New Democratic Party. He has, concerning the Indians, an attitude which in our times is no longer acceptable, that is that we should replace them completely in all situations.

[English]

We decided a few years ago that we should not act as great white fathers to the Indians, that we would respect their wishes. I have been very much involved in this project since it began. On many occasions I have talked with ministers of the province of Quebec on behalf of the Indians, but those who speak officially for the Indians in Quebec are the Indians themselves through the band councils which have now joined together in a provincial association.

A year ago, the Association of Indians in Quebec asked me not to participate directly in this affair. They have held many discussions among themselves. Both Mr. DeLisle and Mr. Gros Louis have informed me of the