

Supply

In June of 1985 an evaluation of the on-reserve housing program estimated that about three-quarters of all existing houses are inadequate in the sense that they fail to meet some basic standards of safe and decent housing.

While just over 2 per cent of the Canadian population lives in crowded conditions, 36 per cent of Indian households were found to be overcrowded.

By the way, that is a very conservative estimate of the Department. The Nielsen report places that estimate much higher, at 50 per cent. The document goes on to say that since 1977 there have been certain significant improvements in overall levels of housing. For example, the Department's program has been able to effect a reduction in the level of overcrowding of on-reserve housing with the average number of people per house dropping from 6 to 5.1. I just want to remind Hon. Members that the Canadian average is 2.9. That is a startling difference.

● (1620)

The particular part of the Estimates I am referring to says:

Proposed changes to meet the continued and urgent need for on-reserve housing are currently under review.

That is good, but they need to become part of an over-all national housing strategy. More than that, with reference to the speech of the previous speaker about the right to adequate housing, when you talk about housing for aboriginal people the concept of "right" is certainly driven home and becomes central to the debate.

While the Nielsen report on native programs to which I have already referred draws certain conclusions which I personally cannot share or support, the statistical description of the situation in Canada is very helpful. Perhaps it is the only helpful part of the report. Let me advise Members, who probably have not read this particular document, that on-reserve housing continues to be among the poorest in Canada. Of 46,500 units, an estimated 11,000 are in need of major renovations. One in three houses is over-crowded with more than one person per room. An estimated 10,000 new housing units are required to meet the backlog created by more than one family living in a house. In addition, 2,400 new units are needed each year to keep pace with new family formation. That does not take into account new demands resulting from reinstatement. That refers to people who, under an Act passed by Parliament, namely, Bill C-31, have had restored to them their rights previously taken away and are returning to their communities. There is an editorial note in the Nielsen report with respect to these kinds of conditions. It says that overcrowding is blamed for contributing to such social problems as marriage breakdown, alcoholism, child abuse and delinquency.

The communities themselves are such that the level of services and adequacy of infrastructure is seriously behind what is generally accepted as the norm in the rest of the country. For example, fewer than 50 per cent of Indian houses are fully serviced with sewers and water. That compares to a national average of 90 per cent. The result of this kind of poorly serviced housing leads to some very major health problems. It is also a contributing factor to the high rate of infant mortality among Indian people. That rate, by the way,

is 66 per cent higher than the national rate. It is attributed to respiratory ailments, infectious and persistent diseases, all related to poor housing and a lack of sewage disposal as well as potable water.

I indicated that the Nielsen report gives us a snapshot of conditions, but then it makes this rather amazing and gratuitous comment. It says:

The federal government is under no legal obligation either through the Constitution or through treaties to provide housing for Indians and Inuit—

That is exactly where the Special Committee on Indian Self-Government parts company with the so-called Nielsen report on Indian programs. I repeat again the view of the special committee. It said that the federal Government has an obligation. It has an obligation to act in the best interests of Indian First Nations as those interests are perceived by Indians themselves. That is a definition of the trust relationship that I described earlier as being very difficult to understand.

I would like to take a little time to advise the House of the basis for that obligation. This is the way it came to be perceived by members of the special committee after more than a year of careful study. We had to look at the historical reality in this country. When explorers and settlers arrived in this part of North America, they did not come to an unoccupied continent, not at all. For thousands of years prior to European exploration and colonization, North America was inhabited by many different indigenous peoples organized into political entities and groupings. When the Europeans encountered these different North American peoples, it was natural for them to apply a term common in Europe at that time. They described these different separate peoples as nations. I know that gives modern Canadians some difficulty, but it has a good and sound historical basis. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, which became the *modus operandi* for colonial policy in dealing with indigenous peoples, referred to "the several nations or tribes of Indians with whom we are connected".

I now come back to the obligation. The obligation flows from the relationship established at that time. It was a government-to-government relationship. It is true that the Governments were somewhat unequal in their strength and power, but it was government-to-government. Governments from abroad, particularly the Government representing the Crown of Great Britain, assumed these obligations in exchange for rights, such rights as the use of land and the right to build the society we now enjoy. It is history which has imposed this obligation upon us. It is not really a decision which can be made by this Parliament or Government. It is an obligation imposed upon us by history. I have argued, argue now, and will continue to argue that no nation can wash its hands of its own history.

When we come to talk about housing policy and the inadequacy of structures in Indian communities today, what is the answer? Obviously if we want to have our feet solidly based on the historical obligation imposed upon us, then we must renovate the treaties. We may want to incorporate in