

Indian Act

improvement and advancement he must voluntarily withdraw from the reservation. This shows what can be done if opportunity for education is given to our Indian population. In that family William Wuttunee is today a law student at McGill university; one of his sisters studied nursing until ill health prevented her continuing; another sister is in Prince Albert studying to become a psychiatric nurse.

All they ask is to be given the opportunity which too often is denied on the reservation. Therefore I ask the minister to send this bill out—broadcast it; print a few extra copies, and send them out to representative Indians, in addition to those copies sent through the regular channels of Indian Act administration.

My second suggestion is one I had made previously and which I reiterate. In the building and restoration of a new concept of dealing with the Indians, give them an opportunity to be builders. Give the leaders among the various tribes, the chieftains or whoever may be chosen in a democratic way among the tribes, an opportunity to come to Ottawa to meet with the minister and to discuss the bill. He may answer that the expense of bringing fifteen or twenty Indians to Ottawa would be heavy, and that the same result would be achieved if they were permitted to meet with Indian agents and officials. My answer is that the same results would not be achieved, because the presence of the Indian agent or official in its very essence has a coercive influence upon the Indians under his control and jurisdiction.

Since I first made the suggestion in the house I have seen a number of these Indian chiefs, and they have repeated their desire, their wish and their hope that the minister will give them an opportunity to deal directly with him, so that anything they may advance by way of amendments to the act and criticism of some of the officials will not have any detrimental effect so far as they are concerned. In other words, what they ask for is an opportunity to meet the minister, who represents to them what they so frequently refer to as the benevolence of the queen. They refer to Queen Victoria as though she were living today. Two of these Indian chiefs, both grandsons of the chieftains who signed the treaties in 1830 and sons of the chieftains who signed the treaty in 1873 that ceded the western plains to the British crown and to Canada, have asked that they be given the opportunity they used to have to come to the foot of the throne and discuss their complaints with the minister himself. After all, we have a responsibility to these humble people, and if he will do that he will receive from them a wealth of suggestions and that

[Mr. Diefenbaker.]

wisdom, evidenced by them when they discuss their affairs, which will go far to remove many of the causes of complaint that today activate and arouse the younger members of the various reservations.

Mr. Coldwell: I am sorry that the standing committee on agriculture is sitting this afternoon and that many hon. members who have taken an interest in this particular problem are otherwise engaged. I am thinking particularly of the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Bryce) who during the last parliament was most interested and active in endeavouring to improve the conditions of the Indians and to see written into our statute books an act which would assist us in helping the Indians to find their proper place in Canadian life. When we review the history of our country we realize how originally Indian lands have been taken away from them from time to time until today there are really insufficient means on some reservations to provide a decent living for many Indian tribes. Consequently we should realize that we owe a debt to them which we have so far failed to honour, a debt which should impel us to write a new Indian Act that will give the Indians an opportunity of becoming a part of our national life in every sense of the word.

The hon. member for Lake Centre made a reasonable plea for the circulation of the new Indian Act to the heads of the various tribes. He also made a plea that the minister should receive representations regarding the provisions of the act from leading Indians in the country. I have a great deal of sympathy with that suggestion, but at the same time I recollect that when the Indian affairs committee sat opportunities were provided for leading Indians to appear before it, and it was very difficult to get a consensus from those who took advantage of the opportunity. If this suggestion is put into effect I hope it will meet with better results than the committee was able to achieve when they invited representative Indians to appear before them during the last parliament.

I cannot see why Indian youth should not receive exactly the same opportunities for education and advancement as are available to our own children. As a matter of fact, when we look at the aborigines of New Zealand—and we call the original inhabitants of any country aborigines—and compare the Indian with the Maori we must feel that there is something wrong with the manner in which we have handled the Indian problem in Canada. As the hon. member for Lake Centre pointed out a few moments ago, given the opportunity Indian youth will achieve