

Indian Affairs

one more point. A reference was made to a message my deputy minister sent to the employees of the department. I was quite disappointed about the remark that was made in this regard because we had announced the intention of the government, if the provinces and the Indians agreed, to extend provincial services to Indians and at the same time the department would be phased out. It was of the utmost importance that the government should inform these people who have devoted many years of their lives to working very hard for the Indians that their rights as citizens, and as civil servants, would be protected. I am saddened that a member of the New Democratic party would make reference to that because these people deserve better treatment. We must make sure that all the teachers, for example, who have worked for years and years on the reserves devoting their time to the Indian people will not be left out on the streets because we are implementing a new policy.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Chrétien: The action that was taken was taken to reassure these people that we would protect their rights as employees and as people who have served their country and the Indians. I wish to stress once more that we will continue the consultations. I will be in British Columbia next week to carry on discussions with representatives of the provincial government. While I am there I will stop at three different cities, not to have consultations but information sessions with the Indian people in which I will answer their questions and make sure they understand the policy.

I hope there will not be too much of a partisan approach to this problem because it is an important problem. I do not believe that in our society we can accept a situation in which there are people who are considered to be second class citizens. We must offer these people full citizenship in the Canadian society. At the same time, however, we will respect the treaties we have signed with them. We will respect the special rights we have given them by treaty. One will see by the policy statement that we have taken steps to make sure that these rights will be protected. But these things must be analysed not only by the government but by the Indians themselves.

● (5:40 p.m.)

This is now the policy and what the Indians have asked us to do. They have asked

us to provide them with funds. This we will do. At the same time, we will have a commissioner look into these matters on behalf of the Indians of Canada and make recommendations to the government. The Indians will draw their own conclusions. Following that it will be up to the parliament of Canada to make a final decision. I thank every member, Mr. Speaker for being gracious enough to extend my time. I hope in the weeks ahead every one of us will try to persuade the Indian people of Canada that we want to offer them a choice, and that they should accept that choice, because they should not be ashamed to become full citizens in the Canadian society.

Mr. Howard (Skeena): Mr. Speaker,—

Mr. Speaker: Is the hon. member rising for the purpose of asking a question?

Mr. Howard (Skeena): Yes, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the minister would permit me to ask him a question before he concludes his remarks. It seems that one of the nubs of the disagreement which has developed over the policy statement is the manner in which it was prepared. Is the minister now prepared to discuss with the native Indian people the possibility of enshrining within the constitution, and this is what a great number of them want, these aboriginal, hereditary or treaty rights—that is a misunderstood term—favourable to Indian people? Is he prepared to discuss this possibility and make a commitment that if it is desirable to the Indian people we will put those rights into the constitution?

Mr. Chrétien: Mr. Speaker, I think the Canadian constitution should be drafted in such a way that the rights of every citizen are protected. We want to respect these treaties and we will. To suggest that we should have in the constitution a provision to make the Indian citizens of Canada something other than full citizens is wrong. What we must do is prove to the Indians that we respect the treaties. If we have not respected these treaties, we must make sure to correct these injustices. When we have corrected these injustices by respecting the treaties the Indians will become equal citizens in Canada. That is a desirable step in our society.

Mr. Dinsdale: Would the minister accept another question? Before posing it, I should