

Territorial Lands Act

This month, this year, Treasury Board gave its final blessing, and of course Bill C-43 has been introduced into the House of Commons. The transfer involves about \$25 million worth of assets in land, buildings, equipment, et cetera, and about \$24 million in ongoing annual O&M expenses.

It is always difficult to forecast precisely how much one will have to spend on forest fire-fighting, since it depends on the weather and a number of other factors. Thus, for a three-year period, special arrangements are being put in place just in case there is an exceptionally bad fire season. After that, the territories will be on their own and will have to finance it out of the normal moneys that are made available under the financial formula.

There are 122 person-years involved in the transfer and about 200 actual living souls. Some of them are full-time and some of them are part-time. It is important that the interests of the employees be safeguarded. It is my understanding that all present federal employees have been offered positions with the territorial Government and that arrangements have been made for the portability of pension credits, et cetera. I have had the opportunity to attend at least one meeting which was designed to integrate federal employees into the territorial public service, and everything seemed to be going well.

● (1610)

I should like to make a few concluding remarks. I can assure the House that the legislation will be very popular and very well received in the Northwest Territories. The people there, by virtue of the Bill, will gain that which is justly theirs—the right to determine how their forests will be managed and how they will be protected. This is no longer to be done by an absentee landlord, however benevolent the landlord might have been.

My thanks go to the politicians involved at the local level, the territorial level, and the federal level. They have recognized the wisdom of the move and have given the necessary sense of direction reflecting the issues of the people they represent. Of course, special thanks should go to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Mr. McKnight).

Some of the unsung heroes of the move are the bureaucrats at all levels of government involved who undertook a very complex series of negotiations. They deserve some credit which they seldom receive.

My thanks also go to the employees of the Northwest Lands and Forest Service for their understanding and willingness to undertake this transfer, which of course will mean some change to their lives.

Finally, I note that today is a happy day in the constitutional history of both territories north of the 60th parallel.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Keith Penner (Cochrane—Superior): Mr. Speaker, I well appreciate the importance which the Hon. Member for

Western Arctic (Mr. Nickerson) attaches to Bill C-43. For many years he was an active member of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Along with many other members of that committee representing all three Parties, there was a constant demand before various Ministers that the devolutionary process for territorial Governments be speeded up. I appreciate my hon. friend's delight that we are taking one of those steps in the House today.

Bill C-43 is a simple but very important housekeeping amendment to the Territorial Lands Act. In essence, it will delete reference to the federal forest management role in the Northwest Territories and also incidentally in Yukon, but that will only come about at a later date fixed by regulation. With this Bill Parliament is transferring the forest and fire management programs to the Government of the Northwest Territories. The territorial Government, in what is a quasi-provincial manner at present, will administer legislation for the management of forest resources and the prevention and control of forest fires. I am convinced that resource management will be improved by integrating forestry with the current responsibility of the Government of the Northwest Territories for wildlife and local economic development.

The Hon. Member for Western Arctic and I are on the same wavelength in terms of our satisfaction with the legislation. I guess the only place where we would part company would be on the history of the transfer. The Hon. Member left the impression that the previous Government had dragged its feet and had not moved quickly enough in the devolutionary process. My hon. friend was rather selective in his chronology, and I should like to fill in some of the gaps, if I may. I am sure this will be familiar history to the Hon. Member for Western Arctic.

In 1979 and 1980 there were severe forest fires in the Northwest Territories. The Dene nation and the Métis association expressed serious dissatisfaction with the fire management policy of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. They insisted that fire management be transferred to local control.

In 1980 and 1981 some meetings were held among federal and territorial officials and the Dene and Métis. However, the meetings were put on hold at the request of the Government of the Northwest Territories, not the Government here in Ottawa. The Government of the Northwest Territories had been unable to reach an agreement with the Dene and Métis in terms which were satisfactory to them in respect of the transfer and involvement of the Dene and Métis in the fire management program after the transfer.

In April 1984, just before the last administration went out of office, the transfer issue was raised in the Legislative Assembly in Yellowknife. In July 1985, when the present Government was in power, the territorial Department of Renewable Resources officially requested the transfer of the forest resource program. That is a very important date. I do not think my hon. friend was suggesting that the transfer should have begun unilaterally with Ottawa. It was right and