

Oral Questions

• (1500)

[Translation]

Mr. Chrétien: Mr. Speaker, I have not yet been directly summoned to the court and I believe the proceedings are now going quite smoothly. An observer from my department is following them, I have regular meetings with the Indians, I offer them all the assistance required and if I am summoned to give evidence—I do not know whether I shall be—I am quite ready to comply with the orders of the court, but I can do no more than keep the court informed of legislation. The attorneys in charge of the case for the Indians have already informed the court of existing legislation, i.e. the Indian Act and the 1912 Act of Transfer.

[English]

Mr. Lewis: Mr. Speaker, may I put this straightforward question to the minister in the hope that I can get a straightforward answer.

Mr. Nielsen: I doubt it.

Mr. Lewis: Does the minister accept the responsibility of the federal government and parliament for the condition of the Indians in that area, despite annexation of the territory to Quebec under an act and, if so, exactly what plans does he have to protect the welfare of the native people in the area who are bound to be affected by the development which has now started?

[Translation]

Mr. Chrétien: Mr. Speaker, I should like to reply to the hon. member but the question he has now asked is a legal one. I accept my responsibilities as Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and I do not believe the Indians of the province of Quebec have complained at any time of my attitude toward them.

JAMES BAY HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT—MEASURES TO PROTECT QUEBEC INTERESTS

Mr. Roch La Salle (Joliette): Mr. Speaker, a supplementary.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for Joliette on a supplementary.

Mr. La Salle: Mr. Speaker, I should like to put a supplementary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

We are all aware of his concern about his responsibilities towards the Indians and my question is as follows: is he willing to do as much to protect as well the interests of the province of Quebec with regard to the James Bay development project?

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, my primary responsibility is the protection of the interests of the Indians; I have repeatedly asked the Quebec government to sit at a table and come to an agreement, but it was felt that the Indians had no rights. Today, their case is before the courts. We will know whether or not they have rights; as

[Mr. Lewis.]

for me, I must fulfil my obligations and help the Indians as much as possible.

[English]

CLAIMS OF JAMES BAY AREA NATIVES—REQUEST FOR STATEMENT ON GOVERNMENT POSITION

Mr. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, I should like to direct a supplementary question to the minister. In light of the decision of the federal-provincial cabinet committee on May 9, 1972, that in view of its constitutional position in respect of Indians and the lands reserved for Indians the federal government has a vested interest in the settlement of the Indian claims and should be a party to the negotiations, will the government now make known its support for the Indians of the Quebec Indian Association either by clearly stating its position to the House on motions tomorrow or by reasserting the position that it indeed has a vested interest in the settlement of the Indian claims and should be a party to the negotiations?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, there is nothing new in that question. I stated in the House on various occasions what was my position as Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and as I said earlier, I will endeavour to help the Indians protect their interests in the James Bay area.

[English]

Mr. Nielsen: In light of the minister's answer, is the government prepared now to make known its support of the position of the Indians of the Quebec Indian Association in a statement before the interlocutory injunction hearing?

[Translation]

Mr. Chrétien: Mr. Speaker, I answered that question on several occasions and stated what had been the government interventions. I wish to point out to the House that I am in constant communication with the Quebec Indians and that such a request could not be made at the present time; besides the Indians themselves did not ask for it.

JAMES BAY HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT—GOVERNMENT POSITION CONCERNING CONTINUATION OF DEVELOPMENT

Mr. René Matte (Champlain): I should like to put a supplementary question.

Could the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development say what is the policy of his department concerning the works now under way at James Bay?

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, we have no direct jurisdiction over that area, but we do have one over the Indian rights and it is precisely because the works are carried out that the Indians have applied for an order of the Superior Court. Indeed, it rests with the court to decide whether the works must be stopped or not, but the specific request made to the court is that they be stopped.