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more effective control over everything that concerns and affects them.

Last December, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Mr. Crombie), and the Minister of Justice, called the first federal-provincial conference held by this Government. At a meeting to prepare for the Constitutional Conference, the Government, through its spokesmen, tabled a proposal to have certain rights of these native groups recognized in the Constitution. We felt that recognition would have to involve agreement on a definition, negotiated by the governments and the groups concerned. The discussions covered the rights issue and especially the very basic issue of native self-government.

Details were worked out at two subsequent preparatory meetings for the April conference and at a number of meetings of senior officials, with the consent and support of native representatives. Generally speaking, the Government shared the view of these representatives that only a constitutional amendment could guarantee protection of ancestral rights and the establishment of a new relationship between the Native groups and the Government of Canada.

We understand the objections of the provinces to enshrining rights which they saw as being rather vague. Nevertheless, the conclusion was that without the constitutional protection or enshrinement of native rights, a special relationship between the Government, the provinces and the native peoples would not survive.

The Government, and I think this deserves some emphasis, considers this a special relationship—a relationship based on trust and honesty and the basis for future developments in the constitutional process. In his opening speech at the First Ministers' Conference last April, the Prime Minister of Canada stated, and I quote:

The Federal Government will not take any unexpected initiatives, nor will it resort to pressure tactics to make you adopt positions that run counter to your principles. We are going to play fair, with our cards on the table.

The Prime Minister went on to stress the place and rights of Native peoples and the inclusion of those rights in the Constitution. He said, and I quote the Prime Minister again:

Recognition in the Constitution of the principle of governmental autonomy would seem to be a primary objective, because it constitutes the most solemn manifestation of the establishing of an indissoluble link, a social contract, between Native peoples and governments.

Mr. Speaker, our first proposal, like the joint proposal made by the native associations, reconciled these two positions. It acknowledged in the Constitution the principle of the right of aboriginal peoples to self-government, leaving aside such issues as powers, fields of jurisdiction and financing to be negotiated later with representatives of the aboriginal peoples. Any agreement resulting from these negotiations should have the same constitutional status and provide the same protection as land claims settlement agreements.

The first proposal paved the way for the discussions I mentioned a moment ago. On every occasion the federal Government proposed a draft constitutional agreement so as to make it possible for all participants to reach agreement. This draft would have led to an amendment on self-Government as early as this year, 1985. This proposal unveiled on the eve of the First Ministers' Conference was three-fold; it included first, full recognition of the rights of aboriginal peoples to self-Government within the Canadian Federation, a point which was to be the subject of negotiated agreements; second, the willingness of the federal and provincial Governments to negotiate with representatives of the aboriginal peoples so as to conclude those agreements; and third, a specific provision stating that those special rights would be constitutionally guaranteed.

During the conference, the majority of participants came close to endorsing an amended version of that proposal in which there was no reference to the willingness or need to negotiate. It could have led to this constitutional amendment rather quickly. We have every reason to believe that we can now count on the support of seven provinces—they represent more than 50 per cent of the Canadian population—to have the amended version accepted. It has been unanimously endorsed by the Council of Native Peoples of Canada and the National Metis Association. However, two of the main groups attending the conference refrained from taking position on that issue. Just the same, the Prime Minister thought that support for the proposal ought to be reassessed at a meeting of interested Ministers to be held later on. As we know now, this meeting will take place next June 5 and 6.

According to the motion now under consideration by the House, Mr. Speaker, the First Ministers' Conference last April was nothing but a public relations exercise intended to reach a consensus which ignored the rights of the aboriginal peoples.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, nothing could be farther from the truth. Allow me to address a particular point. The native people representatives who took part in the April meeting were all well informed and experienced statesmen. They had been involved in the negotiation process concerning aboriginal rights for many years and they did not express any bitterness, contrary to this opposition motion. To prove my point, I should like to quote directly from the proceedings of the Conference a statement made by the representative of the Native Council of Canada, Mr. Daniels, and I quote:

Mr. Prime Minister, we agree with you, and I am surprised at the provinces' unwillingness to support you more.

Mr. Speaker, does this comment sound to you as a futile exercise in an attempt to achieve a consensus with the Premiers without consideration for the legitimate rights of the aboriginal peoples? Here is another statement made during this conference by Mr. Jim Sinclair, who was the representative of the Métis people, and I quote: