

*Indian Affairs*

transfer of all responsibilities in these areas to the provinces. I cannot accept the idea that there will be no continuing responsibility of any kind on the part of the federal government and that it will not even ensure that the provinces are dealing adequately with the Indian people.

Yet the minister has proposed, virtually unilaterally, to do away with the Indian Affairs Branch; and we must all face this question, Mr. Speaker. What will the minister do if he cannot make the necessary arrangements and do away with the branch? His statement in this house has virtually destroyed the effectiveness of the Indian affairs branch. There are reports that personnel of the branch, particularly in western Canada, are seeking new employment. There is no doubt that if the branch survives it will bear a stigma which will make it unattractive to potential employees. I suggest that unless the minister in future proves to be a better negotiator than he has been in the past—in fact, unless the government proves to be better at negotiating than in the past—he will find himself in the position of having destroyed the effectiveness of the department without having set up any satisfactory entity to carry on its work. He will not have made any effective, continuing arrangements, Mr. Speaker.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, the government's methods of dealing with the provinces have been full of faults. The minister proposes to transfer jurisdiction to the provinces; yet it is becoming increasingly clear that the first official word the provinces heard of this proposal was when they read the white paper. I do not think that is a satisfactory way to launch a program like this, and I do not think it is a satisfactory way to conduct federal-provincial relations. All this makes me wonder, sir, just how successful the minister is going to be in implementing his program.

An attempt is being made to wrap this proposal in a progressive aura and to make it seem a kind of Magna Carta for the Indian people. It is far from being that. This debate will serve a most important function if it reveals the fact that this statement was made in the knowledge that it would probably be unacceptable to the Indian people, and if it reveals that no effort was made to determine whether it would be acceptable to the provinces. In those circumstances, it is no wonder that the document has proved far more popular with the press than with the people and provinces it affects directly.

It would be most unfortunate if an attempt were made to cast the Indian people who protest this document today in the role of those who speak merely in defence of a special interest or to suggest that they are merely protesting the disappearance of special rights and privileges they have enjoyed to date. Such accusations would be unjust and inaccurate. We cannot belittle or dismiss the seriousness of the protest of the Indian people. Reference has been made to threats of violence, and I do not make light of those. Certainly, Mr. Speaker, we must face the fact that there has never existed an atmosphere of trust between the Department of Indian Affairs and the people it ought to serve. That atmosphere of distrust was intensified when the government's white paper contained proposals about which consultation did not occur, in effect dismissing representations about treaty and aboriginal rights. We must be honest with each other. I believe there are few more vexing problems in this country than the problem concerning treaty and aboriginal rights which could involve heavy federal expenditures. These are difficult questions of justice and equity which we must consider.

The central concern of the Indian people, and it ought to be our central concern, is that the effect of the minister's statement seems to be to downgrade the importance of this question. I hope the minister will take this opportunity of putting this matter into proper perspective before saying publicly that it has been misinterpreted. The Indian people themselves have made it clear that they are not prepared to discuss the matter with the minister until they have ample opportunity to prepare themselves. I gather the minister is prepared to give an assurance adequate time and resources will be provided to enable them to prepare themselves. I hope the minister will give the necessary assurances in the house this afternoon.

The point of this debate is not to condemn this government for what it has done, although it does seem to have been guilty of trying sleights of hand. The point of this debate is that we want to prevent the government from continuing to take steps which will create a serious atmosphere of suspicion and, perhaps, of disruption. The proposal to achieve equality for the Indian people is not at issue. This is a goal everyone shares. But you do not create equality, Mr. Speaker, by writing on a piece of paper or by making an announcement. You do not create equality by declaring your intention of achiev-