

Working in partnership with aboriginal leaders at the national, provincial and community level, the government is striving to redress past wrongs and improve aboriginal peoples social, economic and political prospects for the future.

Senators have supported the government's native agenda initiatives because it was the right thing to do. Bill C-104 and the agreements it supports are also the right thing to do. They will ensure that 26 Saskatchewan entitlement bands finally receive the land that was promised to them decades ago. In so doing, they will help pave the way for a brighter and more secure economic future for entitlement bands.

I am particularly pleased that these agreements address the treaty land entitlement issue in a way that will benefit aboriginal and non-aboriginal people alike.

Over the next 12 years, hundreds of real estate transactions are expected to occur in Saskatchewan as entitlement bands purchase land. Most of these transactions will occur within the next two years, providing a significant injection of cash into the provincial economy.

Honourable senators, I am certain that the entitlement bands will waste no time in pursuing environmentally sustainable economic development opportunities on the lands they purchase. These agreements and the supporting legislation will end decades of uncertainty for federal and provincial governments and Saskatchewan entitlement bands. They will address a legal commitment that was made in solemn treaties, signed more than a century ago, and they will dramatically improve the prospects for aboriginal self-sufficiency in Saskatchewan.

Honourable senators, I am of the belief that Bill C-104 is deserving of support from all honourable senators.

Hon. Len Marchand: Honourable senators, I would like to thank Senator Berntson for his explanation and introduction of the bill. I would like to congratulate the Leader of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, Chief Roland Crowe and the 27 treaty entitlement chiefs who reached a land settlement agreement with the Government of Canada and the province of Saskatchewan.

The tripartite agreement was the subject of many years of hard work by the FSIN and the entitlement chiefs. The historic agreement allows Canada to finally meet its historic treaty obligations to First Nations in Saskatchewan. It ends a long period of political gridlock and provides some hope that treaty Indians will be able to share in the future prosperity in the province of Saskatchewan.

Honourable senators, Bill C-104 will give effect to the agreement concluded at Wanuskewan, the traditional summer camping grounds of the plains Indians.

The bill is technical in nature, as Senator Berntson explained. It more adequately links the framework agreement reached on treaty land entitlement with federal legislation. The bill provides a means to recognize third-party interests on reserve lands; it authorizes the federal government to reimburse the province for certain mineral revenues; it allows other Saskatchewan treaty land entitlement bands to take advantage of the legislation, should future agreements be concluded; it allows bands to enter into co-management agreements and agreements with water, education or municipal authorities within the province of Saskatchewan; and clarifies several financial arrangements associated with the agreement.

The settlement of the land rights of the treaty Indians is significant for two main reasons. First, it finally fulfils a century-old commitment by the federal and provincial governments to transfer lands to treaty Indians, an arrangement recognized at the 1930 Natural Resource Transfer Agreements, the agreements that transfer all authority over lands to the prairie provinces.

Second, it is significant because it shows the continuing importance of land to Indian peoples and the willingness of first nations to take pragmatic approaches towards the settlement of their lands rights.

• (1550)

In the wake of a failed constitutional process, land agreements like this one in Saskatchewan show all of us that progress can be achieved, that people can move ahead, and that there is room for hope and optimism in this country.

However, Bill C-104 is also significant for what it does not deal with. It does not address the 416 specific claims currently in the process of negotiation with the Department of Indian Affairs. Indeed, it does not address the approximately 100 other claims that are in limbo because of bogus administrative referrals and those which have been unfairly rejected in the past, nor does it deal with the vast majority of comprehensive claims still outstanding at this time.

Honourable senators, the historic achievements represented by this bill allow us to take stock of the progress achieved to date on ensuring that aboriginal people have sufficient lands to guarantee their future well-being. The research I have undertaken in this regard is remarkable and disturbing.

Honourable senators, south of the 60th parallel there are approximately 5.5 million square kilometres of land, yet only approximately 33,500 square kilometres have been set aside for first nations. More disturbing is the fact that the federal government has not set aside a single acre for Métis people anywhere in Canada. Honourable senators, this represents only 0.48 per cent of the entire land mass south of the 60th parallel; only 0.48 per cent of Southern Canada for Indians.