

● (1610)

I want to argue that in the devising of any such national housing strategy there would have to be a major section which would deal with the right of adequate housing in the Indian communities of Canada. I enter this debate because I think it would be a seriously incomplete debate without reference to housing in the Indian communities of the country. I am confused by the thesis of the Hon. Member for Calgary West (Mr. Hawkes) that many of the sociological problems in Canada are related to the L-shaped livingroom. That may or may not be a valid thesis. However, I can tell him that the L-shaped living room is not the problem at all in the Indian communities of the country. In most cases the problem is a one-room shack occupied by more than one family. That is the problem I wish to address now.

It is well known that housing in the Indian communities across Canada is generally deplorable. In fact, it is probably a national disgrace. In the past, federal government housing programs for Indian people produced structures which did not meet national standards. In fact, if those houses had been built in non-Indian communities, many of them would have failed the local building codes and would have been rejected. It is true that at the present time new houses being built in Indian communities are supposed to meet national housing standards. I seriously doubt whether those standards are being adhered to in all cases.

Hon. Members may be aware that many Indian communities are located in isolated regions of the country where the climate tends to be extraordinarily severe. In many cases the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development has permitted these communities to develop on what can only be described as marginal land. For example, I could take Members to communities which are located in swamps where to move from one residence to another one must go along a boardwalk. To fall off that boardwalk would be to put your personal safety in jeopardy.

There are other cases of communities which have been allowed to develop on flood plains. During spring break-up it is quite shocking to see massive pieces of ice weighing several tonnes forced into the very heart of the community, pushing structures aside and crumbling them in their progress. A recent example of this would be the community of Fort Albany on the west coast of James Bay which was flooded last spring. I helicoptered into that community and saw that it had been totally demolished. The same thing happened this spring on the shore of Hudson Bay in northern Ontario where the community of Winisk was totally wiped out. Houses were pushed far out into Hudson Bay, some five or six miles from where the community had originally been established. For years the chief, with the support of his people, has been urging the federal Government and the Government of Ontario to get together and assist them in a relocation plan. The Governments will now be forced to do that.

You will recognize immediately, Mr. Speaker, that when homes are built in these marginal lands which I have described

Supply

home maintenance becomes very difficult. The environment leads to the rapid decay of these inadequately built structures. The elements of nature which I have described wreak havoc, destruction, and sometimes death. In the Nielsen task force report on Indian programs it was suggested that these people really have no business living in these kinds of places anyway. Why do they not live where the rest of Canadians live, crowded along the U.S. border in urban centres? Why do they choose to live in the outer regions of northern Ontario and beyond that?

Surely in a free society we recognize the right of choice. These people choose to live in that general region, although not always on the sites where the Department of Indian Affairs said they will live. This is where they feel at home. This is where they claim that the land is in fact theirs. I personally regard it as essential to our Confederation that these people do tend to occupy areas considered inhospitable and uninviting by other Canadian people. These areas, as well, are an important part of Canada.

That is why it is vital that as quickly as possible we incorporate these people into our Confederation. We must make them believe that they are active partners and participants in our Confederation instead of being extraneous subjects of the Crown or wards of the state. It is absolutely vital that we come to recognize the rights of the first citizens of the country, to recognize aboriginal rights and title to specified lands. We must recognize the right to self-governing institutions.

A few years ago the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs formed itself into a special committee and took one year of its time to look into all aspects of Indian policy in the country. During the course of that study the committee had to wrestle with an extraordinarily difficult concept called the trust relationship. If Members of Parliament and other Canadians do not understand that concept, it is certainly no judgment of them because it is difficult to grasp, appreciate and understand. Briefly, the special committee came to the following conclusion about the trust relationship. It said that while rejecting the view that Indian nations or peoples are wards, the committee agrees that the federal Government has an obligation to act in the best interests of First Nations and to act as those interests are perceived by the Indian people themselves.

If you live in an isolated community with a harsh climate you will recognize immediately that one of those interests must be that of housing. Rarely do I visit an Indian community in my own constituency or in any other part of Canada and meet with the chief and council when the subject of housing is not brought forward as a high priority item.

This year's Estimates of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development make the point that schools and houses are two of the most significant types of capital works projects funded through the Department. I will quote from the Estimates to give you an idea of how the Department itself sees the housing situation. I quote from the overview of the Department in the Estimates for this year as follows: