

Indian Affairs

the Indians. I think we must help the Indian people obtain economic equality. We want to offer them economic and social equality in Canada. We do not want, however, to destroy them as Indians. I believe it is possible in Canada to be a full Canadian and at the same time be different.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Chrétien: The Indian culture is worth preserving. These people were in Canada before we arrived here. They have contributed to making Canada the country it is. We must help them retain their traditions and their own culture, because in themselves they have good values. We can help them. There is no such thing in Canada as "assimilation". I do not want anyone in Canada to be assimilated. No one will assimilate me. I am a different person, a Canadian who speaks French, but I want to share the advantages and the responsibilities of being a Canadian. I know that it is possible for the Indians of Canada to be Canadians of Indian origin and share in the advantages and responsibilities of having Canadian citizenship.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Chrétien: Mr. Speaker, I wish to stress once more that we will be flexible. We do not want to impose anything on these people we want to negotiate and counsel. If people have good ideas concerning how the Indian people may be permitted or helped to catch up further I would be glad to hear them. These people, however, are not the only ones with problems. There are the Métis who have been left out because there are laws which pertain to a certain number of citizens of Canada. Therefore, I maintain the Indian Act is not one which should be retained in Canada because in it we take a distinction between people because of their colour. The language, colour or religion of people should not make any difference. What is important in respect of a human being is the grey stuff he has inside. It is grey for everyone.

We will take whatever time is necessary to implement this policy. The Indians are concerned about their land. I am concerned about it too. I do not want to see it fall into the hands of some speculators. We must design the Indian Act to protect the land of the Indian people. At the same time we must give them an opportunity to make their own decisions in respect of the development of these lands. We shall do so in consultation with them and with the provincial governments. I want to say again that there will be

[Mr. Chrétien.]

a good deal of consultation. I am not referring simply to negotiation. We want to inform the people. I was glad to see a few days ago that the Indian people asked for more time. I think this is a very good request on the part of their leaders because it is necessary that they look into all the implications. We will take all the time that is necessary.

It is important that the government and all the people know in which direction we must go. For a period of a year there have been consultations with the Indians. They say that they want to make their own decisions. They ask us to get off their backs. We want the same thing for them. We want them to make their own decisions. This policy is designed to give them that opportunity. So far as implementation is concerned, there are many ways in which this can be done. We will listen to them and offer them some solutions. There are some solutions which we have offered to them. But if they should wish to retain the same system for many, many years, I would be disappointed because I think with the new possibilities and their new leaders they are able to make more decisions. I believe we should let them do this.

The problem is one of human dignity. I think this policy in general terms has been approved by everyone in this House of Commons. So far as the implementation of the policy is concerned, we will consult with the Indians and give them an opportunity to make their point of view known both to the Canadian public and to the government through more consultation. I think, however, that never in the past has there been so much consultation with the Indians; never in the past has there been a government which has given so much opportunity to the Indian people to make their case not only to the government but to the Canadian public. During the past year 18 consultation meetings were held. We have paid people to make sure that these consultations would be covered by the press and television so that not only the Indians and the employees of the department but also the general public would be informed. I believe this has been a great achievement because never before have we heard so much about the Indian problems. This was due to the fact that, as a government, we were not afraid to put the case of the Indian people before the public. We did not carry on the consultations through the back door. We opened the door to the general public in Canada.

Before ending my contribution to this debate, Mr. Speaker, I should like to cover