

Indian Act

Mr. J. A. Simmons (Yukon-Mackenzie River): I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate the minister on taking early action in this session to bring down this important legislation. I may say it is somewhat disappointing to many of us that it was not possible to proceed with the bill introduced at the last session, but no doubt the delay will prove helpful, in that it has provided wide opportunity to the Indians themselves to make further representations, and to others interested in the subject to submit their views on what might be done by legislation to improve the lot of our Indian people.

It was in 1946 that the parliamentary committee, composed of some thirty-two members of the House of Commons and of the other place, was set up to study the existing Indian Act. This committee laboured for three years, during which representative Indians from across Canada, and representatives of religious denominations and other groups interested in Indian administration, were called to give evidence.

The various parties of the house were well represented on this committee. I should say that those of us who have perused the reports of the proceedings of the committee could not help but be impressed with the magnitude of the task performed, and the sincere and painstaking efforts taken to meet, to the fullest possible extent, the responsibility placed on its members to set up the framework of a new and better Indian Act.

There are, in the riding I have the honour to represent, over 5,000 Indians, and like my colleagues from the Cariboo and Skeena I am greatly interested in the proposed bill.

It is not likely of course that this measure will find favour in the eyes of all the Indians of Canada, nor yet be satisfactory in every way to all those interested in Indian affairs. No legislation of such scope and magnitude ever does. I should say, however, that to me it does represent a sincere and honest effort on the part of government to improve the Indian Act.

There has been a great deal of criticism of the Indian Act, and to some considerable extent, by those who probably never took the time to familiarize themselves with what it contains. In this regard it is interesting to note that there are important groups across Canada who are quite satisfied with the existing Indian Act and do not wish any revisions of any kind made to it; while others will be content with some minor changes.

The proposed measure is no doubt designed to give wider power to the Indian people in the management of their own affairs. It is noted with satisfaction that representations

have been made to have this extend to a greater control of their band funds, the sale of produce and stock, and lease and sale of reserve lands. This would be all to the good. Some of the very objectionable features of the existing statute should be dropped.

I refer particularly to the provision against the collection of band funds to prosecute Indian claims, and to the provision to expropriate Indian lands adjoining a municipality in excess of 8,000 population. No such laws hold against any other racial group in Canada and, consequently, could be held to be of a discriminatory character.

The passage of the proposed legislation, however, will not provide all that is required to improve the lot of the Indian people; for without adequate funds to continue and extend the very commendable program of school construction, housing and other worthwhile projects commenced a few years ago by the Indian department, the new bill will fall far short of what it is intended to accomplish. I will, therefore, be interested to see what provision has been made in the forthcoming estimates to continue these very necessary undertakings.

Surely, when it is possible for this country to extend generous assistance to the underprivileged people of other lands—I am thinking of the Colombo plan, and I have no objection to it whatever—we should be prepared to meet, without hesitation, the needs within our own gates of a people whose roots are very deep in this land of ours, and to whom we have a very heavy responsibility.

There should be no unnecessary restrictions on the school and welfare programs of the Indian department, for there could be no justification for such a move, short of war itself, and especially when one recalls the niggardly treatment of this department in the matter of the provision of funds prior to 1944, which a perusal of the estimates prior to that year discloses.

Mr. Harkness: It was 1945 and 1946.

Mr. Simmons: I came within a year, anyway. As I said at the outset, I am deeply interested in the Indian people of Canada, and particularly those resident in my own riding, which contains the Yukon Territory and the Mackenzie district of the Northwest Territories. It is my responsibility, as a member of this house, to be so interested. I intend to continue to press for those services which are necessary to improve their lot.

The condition of our native population in this area is not a happy one by any means. These people need our sympathetic help to become good and self-reliant Canadians, and much remains to be done. In the northern