

• (1050)

Progress has been equally exciting on the comprehensive claims front. In November of last year the Inuit of the central and eastern Arctic region voted in favour of ratifying their settlement agreement, the Nunavut land claim agreement, which will be, upon passage by this House, the largest land claim settlement in Canadian history.

As well, the Governments of Canada and British Columbia and the First Nations summit chiefs, comprising most of the chiefs of First Nations in the province of British Columbia, have agreed to establish a British Columbia treaty commission to facilitate the settlement of some 20 comprehensive claims in that province, to enter into treaties which probably should have been negotiated and settled over a century ago in that province.

The Prime Minister of Canada, the premier of the province and aboriginal leaders on September 21 last year signed an historic agreement at the Squamish Indian Nation to initiate the treaty commission. Within days the members of that treaty commission will be named by the governments and First Nation leadership.

Today this House has the opportunity and, in my mind, the obligation to take action on a third very distinctive kind of land claim described as treaty land entitlement. In simplicity, this means living up to the promises that were made when the numbered treaties were signed many decades ago.

By supporting Bill C-104 we will provide long overdue justice to the 27 Saskatchewan First Nations which have been denied land that was promised to them in those numbered treaties in the late 19th century and early part of this century.

To put this issue in perspective I think it is important for hon. members to be aware of the historical record. Between 1871 and 1910 Canada sent treaty parties across the west to negotiate a series of treaties with First Nations in the prairie provinces, the so-called numbered treaties. Among other things, these treaties provided for the establishment of reserves for the various bands which were surrendering their aboriginal title to the vast lands that were wanted for settlement and for the development of a new nation.

The size of each reserve was determined according to a very simple formula; by multiplying the band population

at the time the reserve was surveyed by either 32 or 128 acres, depending on the treaty. The later treaties granted one square mile or one section of land for every family of five persons which amounted to 128 acres per person.

While the majority of bands in those times received their full land entitlement when they signed the treaty, about 60 First Nations across the prairies did not receive their full entitlement. There were a number of reasons for this. Around the turn of the century many bands in the prairies still followed a nomadic way of life. They did not have year-round, permanently located communities or village sites. The concept of settling in permanent villages was alien to them. Some bands postponed a dramatic change in lifestyle to settle down and perhaps to live a lifestyle more of our concept, but this was alien to many of them. In some cases these bands took several decades to find a location and to lay claim to particular pieces of land on the prairies.

When these bands did decide to choose their lands, it was inevitable that some individuals were missed during the band population count. It was also apparent that the population of these bands had changed in many cases and had increased significantly from the populations of those earlier days when the treaties were signed. It is worth noting, therefore, that bands did not always select all the land that was due to them. However, in more recent decades another problem developed. It appeared that much land had been deeded and developed, particularly after the passage of the National Resource Transfer Act, and deeded to other interests. It has become a major difficulty that First Nations have not been able to share in the development of those vast Crown lands of the prairies.

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In recent years successive federal governments have endeavoured from time to time to add new parcels of land to the original reserves of entitlement bands. Unfortunately, these efforts have achieved only limited success and it has been a rather *ad hoc* process, not producing a great deal of satisfaction to the respective First Nations. The end result is that today we can confirm that at least 27 bands in Saskatchewan alone have not received all the land promised to them under the various treaties, a situation that is no longer tolerable and that this bill proceeds to correct.