Honourable senators, the money paid to the first nations under these agreements will enable bands to purchase land that has been owed to them for more than a century. The agreements will also establish many of the administrative mechanisms and structures needed for the settlement process to proceed.

Saskatchewan bands account for about half of the Prairie First Nations that did not receive their full land entitlement when they signed treaties between 1871 and 1910. At the time, the amount of land due to a band was calculated based on its population when the reserve was surveyed. Depending on the treaty, the band received either 128 or 32 acres per member.

Inevitably some band members were not included in the original population counts that were made on the date of first survey. This was owing in large part to the fact that most bands pursued traditional nomadic life styles when the treaties were signed. It should also be noted that some bands simply did not select all the land that was due to them. The unfortunate result was that about 60 bands throughout the prairies did not receive their full entitlement of reserve land.

Several attempts have been made over the years to add new parcels of land to the reserves of entitlement bands. Despite the best of intentions these efforts met with only limited success. The stark reality is that, for the vast majority of entitlement bands, a problem that was acknowledged by governments as much as 50 of even 100 years ago remains unresolved today.

The treaty land entitlement issue has been a source of controversy between federal and provincial governments and Saskatchewan bands for far too long. The federal government is committed to bringing an end to this unacceptable situation. With that in mind, in June 1989 the federal government signed an accord with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations to appoint a treaty commissioner to recommend a process for resolving the issue.

• (1540)

The treaty commissioner, Mr. Cliff Wright, is to be commended for his contribution to breaking the deadlock that has been frustrating government and First Nations for decades. His report led directly to the successful negotiation of the framework agreement and the Nekaneet settlement agreement.

Based on Commissioner Wright's recommendations, the settlement approach that has been agreed to by the federal and provincial governments and the entitlement bands, incorporates three fundamental principles. They include, honourable senators, the following.:

First, the bands will receive cash in lieu of land. This will enable the bands to purchase the lands of their choice, rather than being forced to select Crown lands. Second, that certain special provisions will be made to facilitate land acquisition by bands for the purpose of creating reserves. Third, that adequate cash will be provided to enable each band to purchase a quantum of land based on its 1976 population, rather than its population at the date of first survey.

Honourable senators, these agreements signed this past September reflect these principles. However, they can only be implemented with the enactment of Bill C-104, which satisfies a number of specific undertakings made by the federal government and clarifies or strengthens legislative authorities in other areas. I do not intend to expand at length on these legislative provisions, as they are essentially technical. However, I would like to remind honourable senators of their principal objectives which are as follows:

To authorize the federal government to pay to bands any revenues accruing on entitlement lands that have been transferred to the government, but have not yet been granted reserve status; to permit a surrender to take place before entitlement lands are transferred to reserve status when this is agreed upon by the band and the minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development; to authorize the federal government to collect and remit to the province mineral revenue payments so that bands do not have to pre-pay these revenues to acquire sub-surface rights to entitlement lands; to amend the natural resources transfer agreement to release Saskatchewan from its obligation to provide unoccupied provincial Crown land to the federal government for the creation of reserves; to establish a legislative basis for the co-management agreements anticipated between entitlement bands in the province of Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Water Corporation; and, finally, to ensure that any other Saskatchewan bands that are judged to have outstanding treaty land entitlements in the future will have access to the same benefits and provisions as the original entitlement bands.

Bill C-104 is essentially a package of minor technical provisions, but the agreements this legislation supports are anything but minor. They are an historic breakthrough and a major political and economic achievement for the First Nations of Saskatchewan.

They are also a major achievement for the federal government, as they address one of Canada's principal commitments under the native agenda — the commitment to accelerate the resolution of land claims, including treaty land entitlements.

Honourable senators are aware of the progress that has already been made with specific and comprehensive claims. Bill C-104 will ensure that we have taken action on all three elements of the first pillar of the native agenda, and will provide a solid basis for addressing the treaty land entitlement issue in Alberta and Manitoba.

I am sure my honourable colleagues will agree that the aboriginal people of Canada have achieved remarkable breakthroughs in recent years. The gains have been particularly noticeable since the federal government introduced the native agenda more than two years ago.