

I can use the North as an example of what I am referring to. First, the northern economies suffered a severe blow with the collapse of the seal skin industry. Until that collapse, seal skins had provided many Inuit hunters with a small cash income on which they relied to purchase gasoline and hunting supplies, as well as a few household items. The government has recently introduced a few minor programs to compensate for the demise of that industry, but it will take a long time for the northern economy to recover fully.

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We have still more problems to contend with. The introduction of fake Inuit art in southern markets has hurt another important source of income for the Inuit. The proposed changes to unemployment insurance will also reduce the amount of money circulating in the northern economies. Much the same can be said about the proposed GST. The government is also cutting back a subsidy to Canada Post, which was meant to offset the high cost of transporting fresh food and other essential goods to northern communities. This subsidy was initiated to help northerners cope with the unbelievably high cost of living, by ensuring that they would have access to fresh food at reasonable prices. It is estimated that the first round of subsidy cuts will result in a 20 per cent increase in the cost of living for northern consumers.

These developments mean that there will be little money left in northern economies to promote any significant businesses or economic activities. I hope this situation is not an indication that governments have given up on economic development for large regions of the north. That kind of reasoning can only have devastating consequences for the future of the Inuit in Canada.

I proposed the establishment of a Senate committee on aboriginal issues five years ago. At that time I thought that such a committee could help to further advance the progress that was being made in the aboriginal constitutional process. I now believe that a Senate committee is needed to ensure that we do not fall any further behind.

Hon. Earl A. Hastings: Honourable senators, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate and to lend my support to the adoption of the second report of the Rules and Orders Committee, which, in effect, will provide for the establishment of a Standing Committee of the Senate on Aboriginal Peoples. Having regard for the historical significance of this chamber and our duty to protect the rights of the minority, and mindful of the historical treatment of these people, I join Senator Watt and others who say the move is long overdue.

The aboriginals' place in society was described by Senator Marchand as a national tragedy. It has been just that: They have been systematically denied participation, equal treatment and opportunity in our society.

I want to commend the honourable senators who have participated in this debate on focusing on the plight of the aboriginal people of Canada. I have no intention of repeating or adding to the sordid statistics and observations that have been placed on the record to focus on and indicate the dimen-

[Senator Watt.]

sions of the problem; they provide very compelling reasons for the establishment of a Senate committee on this subject.

I do feel, however, obliged to seize this occasion to underline and outline again and place on the record the pitiful, brutal treatment of the aboriginal by the criminal justice system, a justice system that fails the aboriginal in denying him fairness and equality, the cornerstones of a liberal democracy, from the time of investigation and arrest through trial, through custody and through to release. I am sure that honourable senators are receiving a glimpse, as are all Canadians, of the treatment of the aboriginal by the system, by the incredible treatment that has been brought to light in public inquiries such as the Donald Marshall Inquiry in Nova Scotia, the Manitoba Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, the inquiry into the circumstances of aboriginal deaths on the Blood Indian Reserve near Lethbridge, Alberta, and the Ontario Task Force on Policing and Race Relations. It is interesting to note that, in addition to those four inquiries, the Aboriginal Associations of Saskatchewan and Quebec requested similar inquiries but were denied.

From my experience of the criminal justice system, I wish to assure honourable senators that what has been revealed to you by these inquiries are not isolated incidents. They have surely focused on and shown you the brutality and the cruelty of this system to these people across Canada. I have some concern that the inquiries will not serve any great purpose whatsoever once they are finished. In fact, I sometimes remain quite skeptical. I am sad and discouraged, like my colleague, Senator Watt, at times. I am sad and discouraged when I read that the citizens of The Pas, Manitoba, are more concerned about the reputation of their city than they were ever concerned about the treatment of Helen Betty Osborne. I am skeptical when I see the Winnipeg City Police more incensed that they should be investigated than actually concerned about the treatment of J.J. Harper on a Winnipeg street one night; and I am skeptical when I hear that the citizens of Cardston and Lethbridge wish to end, as quickly as they possibly can, the investigation into deaths on the Blood Reserve.

In these circumstances, I hope the Senate committee we are establishing will not let the findings of these commissions be put aside or forgotten, but that the committee will bring them forward and bring in people to explain the decisions and recommendations of these commissions, and of other commissions that will, no doubt, be held for the benefit of the aboriginals.

I said the aboriginal was mistreated from the time of arrest, through trial, custody and release. Honourable senators, in the initial exposure of the aboriginal to the authorities, he is less knowledgeable of his rights; he is totally intimidated by a system that coerces him into the action of pleading guilty because he knows not the system, particularly the subtleties of the plea-bargaining system. He pleads guilty because he is totally intimidated by the system. If they say there are two standards of justice, one for the rich and one for the poor, let me assure you that there are three: one for the rich, one for the poor, and one for the aboriginal Canadian.