

*Indian Act*

of this honourable Chamber, and I dare say that, on a percentage basis or as a total population figure, I represent as many Indian people as any other Member of this Chamber.

● (1510)

At various times I have been a resident of an Indian reserve and have worked for Indian people. I have formed friendships with Indian people that endure and I know will grow stronger as the years go by. I have also worked for the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, but I will not say too much about that because it will play little part in the further regulation of membership and status.

I say those things and draw upon that experience, not in any way to suggest that my opinions are of greater merit than those of any other Member, but simply to say that having been able to experience firsthand some of the effects of the Indian Act as at present constituted, that still does not give me the uniquely valuable perspective of seeing the Act, the instruments it has formed and the divisions it has created, through the eyes of an Indian person.

Let me say that I and others on the committee plan to seek native representation on the standing committee for the period during which Bill C-31 is under consideration; because only at the committee level will we be able to derive the benefit of the unique historic, cultural and personal perspective that the Indian people can bring to the discussion of Bill C-31.

We have already heard the history of the Act presented in a, thorough, erudite and detailed manner. I will not attempt to compete with my colleagues in that regard. However, I will say that the effect of division, exclusion and the effect of federal government control, often exercised arbitrarily by those who had very little real interest in those whom they were controlling, has indeed had the impact of racism, sexism and colonialism that have been alleged.

My friend and colleague, the Hon. Member for Cochrane-Superior (Mr. Penner) mentioned in his address that he felt that in many ways Indian political forums were better regulated and functioned more responsibly than this Chamber. I would also add that in many ways the politics of Indian people are much more interesting than our daily fare in this Chamber. I say that not in derogation of my colleagues or of the Government's legislative agenda, but simply to point out the effects of the Indian renaissance in the last decades in the forums in which Indian peoples have organized themselves to speak at the national level, albeit not with a single voice because there are divisions and differences of opinion that are held strongly. Being able to see from the periphery that process of renaissance, not in the sense of rebirth but of rekindling of the Indian peoples' belief in the strength, responsibility and the relevance of their own Governments and their own interband and intergovernmental processes, has been an exciting time indeed.

I believe that the Indian Act is comparable to the ancient legend of the Gordian knot that was so ravelled and tangled that it could not be undone. The Minister has attempted to emulate the act of Alexander in severing that Gordian knot in

a single stroke. I believe that the legislation, even in its unamended form, does indeed go a long way to severing that knot and undoing the decades and centuries of discrimination, inequality and division that the Act perpetuated.

The amendments address the equality of men and women. They restore status and membership in bands, and the distinction between those two is crucial to an understanding of the Act and the amendments. They restore status and membership in the bands to those who themselves have been directly excluded from that status and membership by virtue of the operation of a discriminatory clause. They restore status to the first generation of descendants on application.

Perhaps what is most important to myself, representing as I do some 50 Indian Governments, is that the amendments recognize that in the future the membership in an Indian band must be under the control of that band. The odious process of enfranchisement, redolent as it was with overtones of colonial Anglo-Saxon superiority, which has no place in this century, is finally abolished. However, we can ask why indeed there should be any continuing provision for the relinquishment of Indian status unless that be at the request of those who have been consulted.

Finally, children will be treated as children and not as classes of children. We will see the provisions regarding adoption and illegitimacy eliminated, and thus those rights harmonized with those rights which exist in the wider society.

We will see the access to off-reserve programs restored. While that is good, I must reiterate my colleague's criticism of the paucity and irrelevance of most of those programs.

I have one major caveat of caution which I would like Members to consider. By the consideration of Bill C-31, we are indeed addressing a major issue for the Indian people of Canada. But we are as far as ever from solving all of the problems of Canada's native people. The passage of Bill C-31 will indeed smash several major injustices. We must ensure that in the committee process as far as possible those major injustices are not replaced by fragmentary minor injustices, as so often is the case.

The time frame under which we will work is not the time frame that I would have sought, had I been in the Minister's place. While we recognize its compelling nature, the time frame is arbitrary, just as the time frame for the proposed passage of Bill C-47 in the last Parliament was an arbitrary and unnecessarily restrictive time frame. I would offer a caution to the Minister in this regard. The Minister speaks of the consultation process which he has undertaken. I know it has been extensive in terms of the miles travelled, the hours worked and the number of bands that have been consulted. We must recognize, however, that there are groups that do not feel the consultation process has been fully extended to them.

● (1520)

One of the first lessons I learned as a district manager with the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development was that it was not good enough to talk to people and then say