

Indian Act

Mr. Manly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I would like to thank Hon. Members for this courtesy.

Land claims policies are now being reviewed and we wonder where such reviews will take us. Indian people are wondering where they are going to end up with the reviewed land claims policy. Will the Government address the serious need of Indian peoples for land, or will it simply take more away from the Indian population and give it to large resource companies, particularly in the North?

The Minister called for reconciliation. We agree with that call. This should be a time for reconciliation. I want to emphasize to the Minister and to all Hon. Members of the Government that the Government itself has to play a key role in that reconciliation. The provision of adequate financial resources is absolutely crucial if there is going to be reconciliation and not more difficulty.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that the women who are going to be reinstated to band membership, and other people as well, have a great contribution to make to their own nations. I think that most Indian people across the country are looking forward to this with a sense of celebration. Even while I say that, I know that others are strongly opposed to it. But I believe there are a great many Indian people who look forward to it with a sense that they will be reunited in band membership with their sisters and daughters, nieces and cousins, and this is an important step. They have a contribution to make and they are going to be able to make it.

The Assembly of First Nations, when it appeared before the committee, said, "We are glad to re-state our pleasure that the Government has moved dramatically toward the position that the Assembly of First Nations has put forward in the past. There has been a real attempt to recognize First Nations' self-determination of citizenship". It went on to say that there were still elements of distrust, however, in parts of this Bill, the first most basic criticism of its provision being:

The limitations on band control of membership in the clauses on compulsory reinstatement and in the clauses on acquired rights represent a final paternalistic or colonial thrust by the Government of Canada.

● (1630)

I regret, Mr. Speaker, that this is not one of the points on which the Government was prepared to move. I can only presume that the Assembly of First Nations feels a great disappointment that the Government was not prepared to accept that suggestion. They continue:

A third basic point is that this reform must not be at the expense of the ongoing constitutional process. The fundamental principle of the First Nations' self-determination must receive constitutional recognition, and with it the basic right of self-determination of citizenship. On this understanding we can proceed with proper reform legislation.

The constitutional process has bogged down, at least temporarily, and I urge the Government to get on with it and make resources available so it can move ahead with the constitutional process. The Indian people see that as absolutely essential to recognition of their right to self-government. They continue:

A final basic point is our continuing concern for adequate arrangements in relation to reserve lands, band funds, program funding.

I regret that the Government has not moved to provide adequate arrangements for program funding, band funds or adequate lands. As New Democrats, we want to see Indian self-government recognized with the proper funds in order to make decision making at the local level a reality. We have seen the First Ministers meet time and again to discuss aboriginal rights, only to restate, like Premier Bennett, that they do not understand what the term means.

Bill C-31 is a small step toward redressing some of the injustices of the past. It is a step toward recognizing the right of Indian peoples toward deciding their own membership. It is a small step, an important step, and I want to commend the Minister for taking it.

We have not washed our hands of this issue yet. The last part of Bill C-31 calls for a report. The Minister has promised that report will be very detailed and will be referred to the committee. I am sure the committee will want to examine it closely. The impact of this legislation on bands all across Canada demands the very closest scrutiny on the part of the Government and members of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and I am pleased to see that the Government has included that amendment. This is an important element of what we are attempting to do in Bill C-31, but, in conclusion, we cannot feel that great about it. It is a small step which some Indian peoples see as a negative, others see as a positive but not going far enough. However, it is a step in the right direction and I want to commend the Minister and his Government for taking it.

Mr. Stan Schellenberger (Wetaskiwin): Mr. Speaker, I rise as a Member who has an interest in this Bill and as one who served as chairman of the committee. As anyone who serves as chairman of a committee knows, it is often difficult to express your views or question witnesses. The chairman's job is to attempt to keep members of the committee on course, keep order, and run the meeting in the best way possible.

It is often difficult for Members to put up with the personal tactics which a particular member may use in committee. I want to thank my colleagues on the committee for putting up with those tactics which I may have used from time to time but which I felt were helpful in our attempts to deal with this Bill. I recognize that as chairman you make few friends when you have to deal with a particular question. I also realize that being chairman of a committee is a very important responsibility, one which I take seriously and took seriously when I assumed that responsibility. As chairman of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development, I know that we attempted to retain the reputation that committee has had over the years of finding solutions to the problems of Indian people in an impartial manner.

In the past the Committee has had very little legislation of a controversial nature brought before it. As a result, members of the Indian community looked highly upon the committee as a group of people who were helpful. Indeed, we were helpful over the years in certain areas, as was pointed out by the Hon.