

*Supply*

• (1235)

It is not only economic good that we seek in these treaty negotiations. We have seen in the aboriginal sacred summit that began across the river in Hull last week, a summit of aboriginal elders organized by the hon. member for Churchill, that the attachment to nature and to the Creator by aboriginal peoples is a central element of their spirituality. Land claims are more than just economic; they are spiritual to the people of British Columbia's aboriginal communities.

I think the House would agree the decision by the provincial government to come to the negotiating table was of paramount importance. Prior to 1990 aboriginal Canadians in British Columbia were offered no hope and no equality of benefits. I remind the House of some of the developments that led to that turning point because in those developments there is a profound irony.

One key player in convincing the British Columbia government to reverse its historical opposition to negotiating treaties was the minister of native affairs for the province at that time, Mr. Jack Weisgerber. Mr. Weisgerber was a Social Credit cabinet minister when British Columbia decided to negotiate. Today he is the leader of the Reform Party in British Columbia. What irony that the decision was taken by a man who had vision unlike what is being proposed across the House.

In 1989 provincial governments appointed the premiers advisory committee on native affairs. The council travelled through the province and met with bands and tribal councils to suggest a solution to address the social and economic issues facing aboriginal people. They were not seeking to continue to erect barriers. And so the province began the process of coming to the negotiating table.

The advisory council made its recommendations to cabinet in 1990 and shortly thereafter Mr. Weisgerber signed the Nisga'a framework agreement. For the first time in the history of British Columbia a province was negotiating a land claim. Soon the B.C. government was deeply involved in the process of bringing the First Nations to the table.

B.C. participated in the First Nations summit and the province met with the federal government in B.C. By the time Bill 22 that created the legislative authority for the B.C. Treaty Commission came into the legislature, Mr. Weisgerber was no longer a cabinet minister but sat on the opposition benches.

However the new NDP government continued the process begun by the Social Credit government although it was of a different political stripe. By doing so it reaffirmed people's faith in the certainty of public policy free from the vagaries of petty subjective politics.

I quote what Mr. Weisgerber said at the time of the debate in the legislature. He pointed out that the strategy for government

in British Columbia for 125 to 130 years had been to deny that a problem with treaties existed, a philosophy it seems the third party still continues to espouse. He said:

It became increasingly clear to us, as we travelled and met with groups around the province, that if we were going to address the root of the social and economic problems, we had to deal with the land claim question.

This was a bold and visionary conclusion to make. It took great political courage. It overturned the accepted political wisdom of the day. It acknowledged a simple reality. It was a daring act of great statesmanship by a politician who put the public good before political ideology. I urge members of the third party to take a leaf from that book.

In 1991 a new provincial government, the NDP government, accepted the recommendations of the last government. Also in 1991 a federal government accepted the recommendations of a provincial government that was not of the same political stripe.

Mr. Weisgerber went on to predict to the B.C. legislature that the First Nations would be very able negotiators. He urged the provincial government to negotiate every bit as effectively for the interest of all British Columbians. He said that negotiations had to be tough but fair.

These are the views of a British Columbian who is not only one of the founders of the current treaty process. I have quoted him at length because of the motion by the hon. member for North Island—Powell River. He asked that the federal government not enter into agreements in order to respect the views of British Columbians on the land claims issue as expressed by both major provincial parties. The leader of one of those provincial opposition parties, the Reform Party of British Columbia, is Mr. Jack Weisgerber, the man who in 1990 put justice before politics.

It is clear British Columbians want to get on with the task of resolving land claims and to become a stable environment for economic growth once again. The process is a good one. The aboriginal peoples approve and both levels of government agree. We cannot put the process on hold each time a government nears the end of its mandate. It is unjust, unfair and cruel.

• (1240)

Where would we be today if we had followed the logic of the hon. member's motion? We would actually be a federal Liberal government and an NDP provincial government not taking up a policy that was carried on in good faith because it was in the best interest of the people.

Back in May 1993 the previous federal government had been in power for nearly five years, since the 1988 election. The former Prime Minister had announced his intention to step down and the Progressive Conservative Party was in the middle of a leadership convention. Did the provincial government and the aboriginal summit say at that time: "Wait a minute. Maybe we shouldn't pass this legislation. After all, the federal government