

In conclusion, while I commend the hon. member's concern and acknowledge his call for a renewed commitment to aboriginal housing, I think it is clear that the government's commitment has never been stronger.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I, also, would like to congratulate the hon. member for The Battlefords—Meadow Lake for his excellent motion. As a fellow member of the Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, I must say that he is known for his social commitment. This motion is entirely in keeping with the social positions he has taken at the committee's hearings.

I will start by referring to the report of the Committee on Aboriginal Affairs submitted in the previous Parliament and entitled "A Time for Action, Aboriginal and Northern Housing". A few years have passed and, although things had to be done at the time, we realize that nothing has really changed and that it is still time to do something. On the government side they consult, they show goodwill, but action is not forthcoming. Meanwhile, we witness life conditions which are probably among the worst in North America.

These conditions have to be seen. I belong to the category of people who believe in seeing for themselves, and I have visited a number of people from the First Nations. No later than today, I called upon my colleagues on the finance committee to fly or drive to some aboriginal communities to find out, first hand, how these people live today. I do not think I would offend anyone by saying that they live in a Third World economy.

As we can see in the Auditor General's report, tabled yesterday, aboriginal people have very high rates of poverty. In some communities, the unemployment rate is 80 per cent; the suicide rate is sometimes five times higher than the Canadian average. Despair permeates these communities; the education level is much lower than the Canadian average. They are the victims of a paternalistic attitude they have been subject to for a long time. And yes, housing is unfortunately totally inadequate.

I saw with my own eyes four generations living under the same roof. Imagine the promiscuity, the total lack of intimacy. Imagine having to eat every day with twenty people, representing four generations, around the table. These are things you do not see in the Third World; even in Latin America people are better off.

There is a lack of infrastructure and adequate housing. How many communities do not even have sewers? How many communities do not even have running water?

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In a modern society, in a country like ours which boasts of a very high standard of living, tolerating Third World living conditions such as these is totally unacceptable.

On top of that, some houses are of a style totally foreign to native culture. In some communities, all the houses are the same, tiny little bungalows. There is no concern for native culture, history or tradition. Across Canada, houses built the same way and often—I will come back to that later—by people who do not even live on the reserve. You can see that the Department of Indian Affairs is not really concerned about native culture and maintaining it but rather is driven by economic factors. So, let us build the cheapest houses possible.

Financing on reserve is difficult. It is a real mess.

• (1800)

There is the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and then the Department of Indian Affairs. It is a mess. People do not know who to turn to. For housing construction as well as renovations, waiting lists are a mile long and, in many cases, the agencies pass the buck back and forth.

Also of note is the limited involvement of native people in policy development. My colleague opposite mentioned earlier the significant contribution of native people. Again, as I said earlier, I just left a finance committee meeting, and the First Nations' leader was telling us that he deplored the lack of consultation of First Nations on housing policy. This policy has been in the making since 1984. And let me remind you that I started my remarks by saying that it was time to act. My hon. colleague says that it is time to act, time to consult but, for all practical purposes, the First Nations' leader told us no later than this afternoon that it was not happening.

The reserves derive very little in the way of economic benefits from the various government programs. I do not want to embark on a discussion on the whole thrust and the whole gamut of government programs for native people, but the fact is that very little benefit accrues to the reserves per se from housing-related activities as well as other ones. Services are often provided by outside contractors who, on leaving the reserve, keep Natives in some degree of dependency.

I will translate almost word for word what my hon. colleague said earlier, when he quoted the 1991 report of the Auditor General. I will repeat what he said in French because we are using the same reference. In his 1991 report, the Auditor General said this: "Inadequate and overcrowded housing, among other things, can contribute to social and health problems, such as sickness, marriage breakdown, alcoholism and child abuse. The financial results can be measured in terms of