

Supply

these treaties indeed would have less and less significance in the future anyhow.

With regard to the question of aboriginal rights he said:

Our answer is no. We can't recognize aboriginal rights because no society can be built on historical "might-have-beens".

The Indian people across Canada did not accept the White Paper. They did not accept the assimilationists' philosophy and began to organize. There was a great awakening of the Indian people all across Canada. People from the Nisga'a, the Cree, the Mohawks, the Micmacs, discovered that they had a great deal in common and began to build a truly Canadian Indian movement which would fight for them. They awakened to a new understanding of their rights, to a new pride in their culture and to a new determination to regain basic control over their lives.

The second event is very closely related. The refusal of the Government to acknowledge aboriginal claims led the Nisga'a Indians on the Nass River in northern British Columbia to take their historic land claim to the Supreme Court. More than any other aboriginal nation in Canada, the Nisga'a had fought for recognition of aboriginal title. It was a fight that went back to the days of Queen Victoria. They have never given up that struggle and they are still struggling. Taking their claim to the Supreme Court resulted in a split decision. Former Prime Minister Trudeau in 1973 said: "Perhaps there is more to aboriginal rights than we thought". I think it is to his credit that, having denied the very concept of aboriginal rights, when the Supreme Court came down with this split decision he recognized there was something there and he was prepared to move on it. As a result a land claims policy was set up. It is a policy which has not worked very well so far for the aboriginal people, but it has at least made people aware of aboriginal rights and that growing acceptance has been indicated by the polls.

In 1980, 1981 and 1982, when former Prime Minister Trudeau was working on patriating the Canadian Constitution, one group of people who took that whole patriation process very seriously was the aboriginal peoples of Canada. They fought very hard to have recognition of their aboriginal rights included in that Constitution. After a hard fight it was included. It was then taken out but it was put back in in a weakened form. When they put back, in a weakened form, recognition of existing aboriginal treaty rights, they were given the promise of First Ministers' Conferences which would further define those rights. A lot of hope was attached to these First Ministers' Conferences, but so far they have been exercises in high frustration. There has been a lot of grandstanding and posturing, but where are the results which affect the average life of the Indian person living on a reserve, a Métis person living in one of their settlements or an Inuit person living in an Inuit village in the Northwest Territories?

The process which was set out in those First Ministers' Conferences has continually been frustrated on the one hand by the intransigence of some provinces, particularly in the past

by Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Unfortunately, the Province of Ontario seems to be joining the ranks of that intransigence for the current round. Second, that process has been frustrated by a failure of the federal Government to give the kind of leadership which is needed to rally the Canadian people around this whole issue.

Perhaps that failure of leadership is exemplified by the statement made in the March 11 debate by the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Mr. McKnight). He said:

There has not been a proposal put forward in the meetings that has not been supported by the federal Government when it came to trying to bring consensus from all sides of the table.

We recognize that the Government would like to have a consensus. We recognize that the Government has good intentions. However, basically what it is doing, and what the Minister said it was doing, was following. When other governments presented proposals, the federal Government would say: "Let us see who supports that. Who is willing to go along with this?" Where did the federal Government stand in providing the kind of leadership which was necessary to create a total Canadian consensus around this issue which would result in action?

The Minister of Justice (Mr. Hnatyshyn) in his speech pointed out the view that recognition of inherent rights leaves the Government open to lawsuits. A right is a right. We are talking here about a right of the aboriginal peoples which was never surrendered. Before the coming of non-Indians and non-aboriginal peoples to North America, these people had the right to govern themselves. Historically, they did govern themselves. They have never surrendered that right. Therefore that right is still intact.

• (1500)

Why does the Government take the position which says in effect: "We are prepared to give this to you as a privilege, only if you are prepared to accept that you do not have a right to it"? The people have a right—they insist on that right. They will not bargain it away for the few chips that the Government thinks it can give to them as a privilege.

Our Party wants the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) to show the type of leadership that Prime Minister Trudeau showed in his great project of patriating the Constitution, for example, or the type of leadership that the present Prime Minister is evidently now prepared to give in his own pet project to sell free trade to the Canadian people. Why does he not give that type of leadership to the question of entrenching the rights of aboriginal people to self-government?

I urge the Government to catch a vision of what self-government can do for Canada, as well as for the aboriginal people. Instead of a grudging concession to the needs of aboriginal people, why not take a positive step which the Government can see as doing something for all of Canada so that to be Indian, Métis or Inuit will no longer be synonymous with poverty or with being off in the margins of Canadian life