

Hon. Charlie Watt: Honourable senators, I believe this matter has been a long time coming.

I wish to make a few points in support of establishing a Standing Committee on the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada. In doing so I will be speaking about the single most important issue I can possibly address in this chamber—the future of my people in this country.

Unfortunately, I am deeply discouraged by what I have to say on this subject. For the first time in many years I am beginning to ask myself if Inuit really do have a future in Canada. I have heard more and more Inuit asking themselves this question. This is a sorry situation which has serious implications for our future as a people. It means that we are starting to lose hope. The results of hopelessness and despair can be devastating. Cultural collapse, alcoholism, family violence, a horrifying suicide rate, high unemployment, and a wasted and disinterested youth are some of the examples.

I am sure my good friends, Willie Adams and Len Marchand, are only too familiar with what I am talking about. But other honourable senators may gain a better understanding of my frustrations if I describe the situation in terms of my expectations and experiences.

When I was first appointed to this place I was optimistic. I felt that Inuit and other aboriginal peoples were beginning to make some real progress. We were gaining a foothold in this country, and we were finally in a position to start taking our rightful place in Canada.

To my mind, there was no turning back. It seemed that the country was slowly but steadily making room for our values, cultures, and economic aspirations. The difficult but rewarding journey through the land claims process was starting to pay off for northern Quebec. There was no better example of what we had hoped to achieve than our role in the constitutional reform process. A hundred and fifteen years had passed since Confederation, but the aboriginal politicians were finally sitting with the first ministers to work out an amendment to entrench our rights and institutions into the highest law of the land.

Many people do not fully appreciate what this kind of positive outlook can accomplish for aboriginal peoples. It provides us with the confidence to take a chance on Canada. This means we can evolve, participate, and reach new accommodations with those Canadians that only arrived within the last 500 years. Without this positive outlook, it is doubtful that many aboriginal peoples will even care to try to take their rightful place in this country, making it very unlikely that Canada will ever come to terms with its aboriginal peoples.

It is for these reasons that I am sad to say that I am no longer as optimistic as I once was. Today I see that not only have we stopped moving forward but we are actually starting to fall behind. This is a scary thought for the Inuit and other aboriginal peoples, who have so little to begin with.

It seems like we are losing our opportunities to gain a foothold in this country on all fronts. We have been effectively eliminated from the federal-provincial process on rewriting the Constitution. In the land claims process we are encountering a

policy whereby few of any acquired rights can gain constitutional protection under Section 35 of the British North America Act. In terms of economic development, it appears that we must take two steps backward for every step forward, because our fledgling economies cannot withstand the decrease in federal spending. Moreover, our youth is trapped in a faulty education system that almost guarantees that they will stay years behind those students enrolled in non-aboriginal schools in southern Canada.

Funding cuts are also doing much to erode our position in this country. While the federal deficit dictates the need to reduce some government expenditures, it is all too easy to predict that aboriginal funding and programs will be the first up on the chopping block. It is the old story of those who are last to share in the wealth of the country being the first to be cut.

The funding cuts I am referring to are very real and they are often directed at aboriginal organizations. When I mentioned that we have been written out of the constitutional process, I was not just referring to wording contained in the Meech Lake Accord. I was also talking about the fact that all constitutional funding to aboriginal organizations was promptly cut off shortly after the failure of the 1987 first ministers' conference.

More recently, a 7 to 8 per cent reduction in Secretary of State budgets resulted in a 15 per cent cut in the core funding provided to aboriginal organizations. My national organization, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, has endured two such cuts in recent years; it has received absolutely no increases in funding over the last seven years; and it expects another round of cuts this spring. This means that ITC has literally no travelling money; and it is down to its president and two regular staff members. It is now questionable whether our national organization will be able to survive the next few months. I am very familiar with their situation, because, as president of Makivik Corporation, I sit on the ITC board of directors; I have had to participate in the decisions to reduce expenses to the point where our national organization has lost much of its ability to represent effectively the interests of the Inuit.

I understand that the situation is similar for the national organizations representing the Métis and non-status Indians.

I hope honourable senators realize that I am not complaining about the loss of a few funding dollars. What is at stake here is our ability and our right to represent ourselves and to promote our interests in Canada. Despite the sprinkling of aboriginal members in the Senate and the House of Commons, these national organizations still have a vital role to play in representing aboriginal interests in this country.

On matters relating to economic development, I applaud the government for its initiative in creating and funding the Canadian Aboriginal Economic Development Strategy. However, I am afraid that many aboriginal businesses will never get off the ground because there will be so little money left in their regional economies. That is due to reasons both under and beyond the control of the government.