

Indian Bands Claims Settlement

I first made the acquaintance of the people of Whitedog, the Islington Indian Band, and the people of Grassy Narrows approximately a decade ago, almost to the month. In 1976, I had the privilege of visiting their communities. At that time I was struck by the air of desolation and by seeing a dog limping crazily and zig-zagging down a dirt road. Obviously the dog had been affected by the consumption of mercury contaminated fish and presumably had a very short life because of it. I was also struck, even then, by the spirit of the people. That is what sticks out in my mind as I address the Bill today. I was struck by their spirit and their determination not to be ground down by the force of circumstance or by the blind, ignorant damage of an industrial system from which they never benefited and which they were totally unable to influence at the time.

I should also like to mention some of the outstanding people who, by personal commitment, made it possible for Whitedog and Grassy Narrows to reach the situation of today, the ratification of the agreement. Of course these are mostly people from the communities themselves, but there were some who were outsiders to the community and should be mentioned, for example, Bruce Crofts, John Olthuis, and retired Justice Emmett Hall who was mentioned by the Minister. More particularly I should like to refer to the leaders of the bands—former Chief Steve Fobister and present Chief Arnold Pelley of Grassy Narrows; former Chiefs Isaac Mandamin and Roy McDonald, as he was at the date of the signing of the agreement, and present Chief of the Islington Band at Whitedog, Anthony Henry. These are the people who will carry forward the torch for their communities and for their peoples. These are the people who will play the leadership role in taking this compensation which, while I would not term it token, can never compensate for all the damage done to those communities. I know it was not designed with the idea that it could totally compensate.

Let us merely say that the compensation which has been granted to the people of these communities is relatively modest, or very modest indeed, in comparison with the assistance and the guarantees which the damaging parties have received, and of course in comparison with the profits they have made. That is not said in a spirit of meanness or revenge with regard to those parties. I believe that it is by partnership in the future that the situation of the communities of Whitedog and Grassy Narrows will be improved. It is by co-operation based upon an understanding, an awareness, and a resolve by the people of the country, by the leaders of industry and by those who bear responsibility for environmental regulations, that this type of tragedy, which we take a small step toward correcting today, shall never happen again in this Canada of ours.

Mr. Iain Angus (Thunder Bay—Atikokan): Mr. Speaker, I should like to join in the debate this afternoon. As the Minister indicated during his opening remarks, there are some people who have been involved in one way or another for a number of years.

The problem started back in 1970 with the discovery of mercury contamination from the Reed Mill in Dryden. That was before the time that I became involved in politics, but it became an issue of which I was very conscious as a resident of northwestern Ontario. In 1975, as a Member of the Ontario Legislature, I found myself having to deal with that issue in a general sense in the House and in committee. I find it ironic that today, 16 years later, we are closing a chapter of the book relating to the history of Whitedog and Grassy Narrows. I also find ironic the way in which white society in Ontario has treated our native brethren, our original residents of the country. Nothing could be clearer than taking a look at that very small corner of northwestern Ontario to see the dual approach—and I say it frankly—which the Government of Ontario took in dealing with those residents.

In the community of Minaki, the Government of Ontario spent over the last 16 years upwards of \$50 million in the redevelopment of a luxurious resort facility designed to attract people from outside the area and to stimulate the economy. On the other hand, a small native community a few miles up the road and its neighbour, the second community we are debating today, received only talk from the Government of Ontario for most of those 16 years. All they got from the corporations was talk. All they got from the federal Government was talk.

• (1740)

I want to compliment the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs (Mr. Crombie) for having the willingness and the fortitude to get something done. I want to compliment the new Government of Ontario for deciding that it was time we had a settlement and that we had to work collectively instead of fighting over whose jurisdiction it was. I compliment the patience of the bands. My colleague, the Hon. Member for Kenora—Rainy River (Mr. Epp), mentioned the leaders of the two bands who have participated over the years. I compliment them on their patience. Perhaps that is one of the lessons they can teach us as a result of this process. When you are dealing with the white society you must have patience because we are not prepared to act quickly to respond to specific needs. This should not have taken 16 years, at least not to provide the kind of compensation finally reached. It should have been a matter of course.

Whether it was the federal Government or the provincial Government, it should have met with the bands in a short period of time, worked out what their economic needs were and what they needed to replace their livelihood, which was based on natural resources, particularly the fishing industry and the wild rice industry that was destroyed by Ontario Hydro. That is what we should have done. Either the federal Government or the provincial Government should have taken the companies to court. Why let the natives, who have been suffering because of Minimata disease and because of the loss of their traditional livelihood and forced onto welfare and into alcoholism, do it? We as a society had the responsibility. We as the federal Parliament had the legal trust for those reserves. We should have taken that action and done on behalf of