

*Indian Affairs*

They have come to me. I have received them. The government has agreed that we should discuss this with the B.C. government in order to get those Indians some land. They want to have the lands they now occupy. The hon. member for Skeena has conveyed to this House very well the attachment the Indians have for that land. That is why I went to B.C. I wanted to try to correct some of the wrongdoing of the past. I hope the hon. member, who belongs to the party which is governing in British Columbia, will help so that we may make progress there.

When the Nishga people decided to go to court, their action was not against the federal government; it was against the B.C. government. Now the decision has been handed down by the Supreme Court and the government of the day in that province will have every occasion to prove that they support the concept that the hon. member for Skeena has talked so much about. When you are not in power you can make statements like those the hon. member has made. On the other hand, we have done something about the question and we will continue to take action.

Let me now refer to the claim to land title brought by the B.C. Indians. This is another matter I raised with the B.C. government when I was there. I wanted to see what kind of mechanism could be introduced. Everyone knows that it is not possible for the federal government to give back to Indians in any province some land, because lands within a province are controlled by the provincial government. It is not me who decides that land within the borders of a province is provincial Crown land; it is in the Canadian constitution.

I wish to illustrate some of the difficulties we face when trying to resolve these problems. We are not just making speeches in this House. I wish to point out what we have done, what we are ready to do and what we will do. We will keep on working to resolve these difficulties.

• (1640)

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Chrétien:** I am very proud to see the Indians appear before a committee of this House and make representations such as they have. I am also proud of the fact that the Indian associations are functioning well. The first time in Canadian history that the Indians received any help to become organized and put their needs before the Canadian public and the government was when we started to give them grants to organize. We provided funding money so that they could come before the Canadian government and state their case.

It is easy to make broad, sweeping statements, but I wish to again state the point I made over television last Sunday. The situation is not the same everywhere. Everyone knows that. We would be hiding our head in the sand if we claimed that one Indian policy and one Indian title could solve all the problems. I have been confronted with many different aspects of the problems.

British Columbia was a colony before entering confederation. Crown land was then in the hands of the provincial government. When the Prairies became provinces, the Indians received land from the federal government. There were other types of government in the Maritimes and

[Mr. Chrétien.]

Quebec long before confederation. This created another legal implication. I do not want to be legalistic about this. It is a fact of life. These aspects cannot be dealt with in isolation. You have to look at the problem and make a decision, such as was made by this government, that you will resolve the problems. We will go all out to find a solution that is acceptable to the different areas of Canada. There has been talk about the James Bay project. I am ready to talk about that.

**Mr. Fraser:** It is too late.

**Mr. Chrétien:** It is not too late.

**Mr. Davis:** It is never too late.

**Mr. Chrétien:** That case is now before the courts. After negotiating with the Quebec government, the Indians decided to go to court. They were not happy with the response they received from the Quebec government. I said this in this House, I said it to the Quebec government and I repeat it today—the best course the Quebec government could have followed would have been to offer a generous settlement along the lines asked for by the Indians. The Indians are still asking for that. We have helped these Indians. Their problem is now before the court. We have financed them all along. We provided them with expert advice and put at their disposal all the documents we have. Do members opposite want me to go before the court in their place? I do not want to do that.

There is also the case of the Nishga Indians of British Columbia. They went to court on their own. They did not even ask the federal government for assistance. At one point I offered financial help. They informed me that they could finance their own case. They did not accept the money. They felt they had a good case and could defend themselves. A decision was handed down by the Supreme Court. Following that, I was asked to intervene with the British Columbia government. Ten days ago I explained the problem to that government. I hope we can come to terms with the British Columbia government because the Indians are asking for land, not money.

There was also a claim by other groups of Indians in British Columbia who have not signed treaties. I have started talks with the British Columbia government because the cut-off land question was made by the provincial government at the beginning of the century. Those problems have never been resolved. It is a completely different problem and I will have to find another mechanism. We have agreed to negotiations in the Yukon. The mechanism has already been established. I hope it will be a framework for a solution that can be accepted elsewhere in Canada. We cannot move on this for political reasons, as some people claim.

One Indian leader who appeared before the committee was flabbergasted because the committee members did not ask any questions. They wanted to have a vote right away. The hon. member for Richelieu (Mr. Côté) said that he would at least like the privilege of being able to read the document. Five minutes before the vote, he was delivered a French copy. Members opposite claim they want to defend the minority. Was it an unreasonable request by a member of this House, who does not speak English, to read the document before the vote?