

Indian Act

this will not take place in future. Such an amendment should translate into law the recommendation made by the Women's Missionary Society of the United Church of Canada, Alberta conference branch. They are just one among many organizations who have made this type of representation.

The Deputy Chairman: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member but his time has expired and I have made allowance for the interruptions.

Mr. Simmons: Mr. Chairman, at the outset I should like to take advantage of this opportunity to congratulate the minister upon introducing this important resolution to amend the Indian Act to provide for a number of changes in connection with the administration thereof. I wish also to pay a special tribute to the efficient direction given at the executive level in recent years in the Indian affairs branch. I refer particularly to the late Major D. M. McKay and to Colonel H. M. Jones, his successor as branch director. Colonel Jones, like Major McKay, has established a fine reputation for leadership and has shown a rare understanding of the Indian problem. The unselfish service and willing co-operation of these two directors have helped greatly all those who have tried and are trying to make a constructive contribution to the solution of this present problem.

I think all hon. members must admit that it is not an easy problem to solve. Various steps have been taken and measures have been proposed by the federal government from time to time. We all know that, no matter how well intended they were, those measures have fallen substantially short of perfection. Somehow it seems difficult to rid official thinking and legislation of the wrong idea that we are dealing with an inferior and subordinate people. At any rate that is the impression left with the Indian himself. I am satisfied that the fault in this direction does not rest with officials of the Indian affairs branch in Ottawa, but rather that in the past many of our difficulties with the Indian population have stemmed from actions of local Indian agents. Indians in a sense have been wards of the federal government. There is a definite responsibility on the administration at Ottawa to make certain that Indians do not become destitute. More than that, the aim should be to see that our Indian population advances steadily from a state of wardship to a status of equal citizenship with non-Indian Canadians.

To this end they should receive adequate education and training if the conception of equality is to have any real meaning of significance. I have always been deeply interested in the Indian people of Canada and

particularly those residing in my own constituency. They number about 1,700 in all. Ever since I entered parliament I have been urging the adoption of a new and better deal for the Canadian Indian. I intend to continue to press for those laws and services which I believe necessary to the improvement of their lot and to their value as people residing in this country.

I know that it is unrealistic to expect that legislation can be designed to cover fairly and within the strict letter of the law every possible individual case or set of circumstances. That is where sensible interpretation comes into play and where the Indian agent on the spot can exercise a most helpful discretion. But I have found in my many years' residence in the north that there is a need for Indian agents who are not tied to their desks, but who will get out and give personal instruction, guidance and supervision to the Indians in their charge. I wish to reiterate that in my view the agents should spend considerably more time in visiting the Indians in their camps and settlements to discuss their grievances and problems personally with them, rather than the Indians being obliged to travel many miles to bring their troubles and grievances to the agents at local headquarters.

In the selection of Indian agents by the civil service commission, I cannot say that good judgment has been used at all times, especially in the past. Academic qualifications are too often given too much weight, whereas those men who have a practical knowledge of Indians, their habits and way of life, and who know local conditions, are not given the consideration they deserve. Some of the best Indian agents I have known are men with practical experience among the Indians and who have not always had the benefits of higher education. These men were highly respected and liked by the Indians themselves. Just because a man with a higher education can sit down and write a good examination does not necessarily mean that he has sufficient practical experience and qualifications to fill such positions. In many instances they do not possess tact or good judgment in the sympathetic understanding of Indian problems.

Instead of this being so, we find too often a tendency toward evasiveness, indecision and buck-passing as between various departments of government, as well as an inclination on the part of local officials to hide behind a tangle of rules and regulations.

On the other hand, I realize that Indians are often not readily understandable or easy to work with. In some instances they fail to assume personal responsibility and accountability in the way that non-Indians more