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Statement on Opposition Day Motion on Aboriginal Rights and Treaties

January 31, 2013

Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the Member for Joliette.

The motion before us reads:

That the House, recognizing the broad-based demand for action, call on the government to make the improvement of economic outcomes of First Nations, Inuit and Métis a central focus of Budget 2013, and to commit to action on treaty implementation and full and meaningful consultation on legislation that affects the rights of Aboriginal Canadians, as required by domestic and international law.

I want to take some time to focus on the Northwest Territories, which is a singularly unique area of Canada where we have settled and unsettled claims. We found the best way to improve the economic situation of our indigenous people in the Northwest Territories is to settle land resources and self-government claims.

In the parts of the Northwest Territories where the claims have been settled, people have increased prosperity and the private sector, which wants to invest there, has certainty in the regulatory process. That is very clear. The opposite is true for those areas of the Northwest Territories, which still have unsettled claims.

In testimony before the members of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Committee during hearings in Yellowknife on Bill C-47, the N.W.T. and Nunavut Mining Associations and the N.W.T. Chamber of Commerce both stressed the value of having settled claims.

There are some examples of how settled claims can improve the economic situation of First Nations people, Inuit people, and I will speak to two of them.

One is the Inuvialuit. The Inuvialuit were the first to settle their claims in the Northwest Territories. They did a very good job of it in 1984, with excellent claim settlement. They took over large pieces of their traditional territory. They got surface and subsurface rights in the oil-rich Mackenzie Delta and the Beaufort Sea area. They were in a position to take advantage of resource development, resource exploration in that area, and they have built an amazing Inuvialuit Development Corporation, which owns outfits like Canadian North Aviation. Members may have flown on it themselves. It owns the Northern Transportation Company Limited. It has investments and opportunities for Inuvialuit people throughout the Northwest Territories, at all levels of employment.

It is through this settlement that the Inuvialuit were to get their heads into economic development, rather than spending their time trying to fight with the federal government over land claim settlements.

We could talk about the Tlicho government, settled under the Liberal government in 2004. Its land extends through diamond-rich areas of the Northwest Territories. It has rights to large areas of land, surface, subsurface. It has opportunities on that land. What has it done with them? It has created the Tlicho Development Corporation. That development corporation, in less than 10 years, has gross revenue in excess of \$130 million, employing 800 people.

This is the kind of effort that could be made by first nations when they achieve control over traditional lands and territories, not when they are stuck on reserves, not when they do not have the opportunity to participate fully in the resource economy.

However, this is not the case in the areas of the Northwest Territories that do not have settled claims. In the Deh Cho and the Akaitcho regions, both incredibly rich areas of the Northwest Territories, the Deh Cho with its gas deposits, the Akaitcho once again with mining and great opportunities as well, negotiations on land claims are stalled. They have been stalled with the government for many years.

Much of the fault lies with the federal government through actions like continually changing negotiators, never giving negotiators the ability to make decisions, revisiting areas which have been agreed to in negotiations and changing negotiation mandates. These are all things that completely obfuscate the system.

In these two regions there is much uncertainty. The investment is difficult. Now there are brave companies, and I speak of Avalon as one company that is going through the environment assessment process. It won awards for its ability to talk to the first nations in those regions and to bring them into the process themselves.

We see industry taking over the role of government in providing the authority to First Nations to make decisions on their land. That is what it takes in unsettled areas.

Chief Roy Fabian of the K'atl'odeeche First Nation recently told the Aboriginal Affairs Committee the following during hearings on Bill C-47 on the Surface Rights Board Act:

“This legislation is a serious matter that strikes at the heart of Treaty 8 and jeopardizes our attempt at reconciliation with Canada. The legislation appears to be an attempt to circumvent our land claims process and undermine our authority over our lands. I want to make it clear that this Bill, if passed, will not be recognized as valid law on K'atl'odeeche territory. If the federal government attempts to impose this legislation on our Treaty land then we will consider our legal options to oppose this legislation and resist every attempt to grant an access order on our land.”

Where does that leave industry? Where does that leave certainty? Where are we going with that? That is not working, is it?

Chief Fabian highlights a key element in current federal-aboriginal relations, namely that federal action or inaction is causing a rising sense of dissatisfaction among Canada's First Nations, its aboriginal people, leading to movements like Idle No More. It is leading directly there. It is leading to a movement that we can all get behind: we should not all be idle on this issue. We should not be obfuscating. We should not be trying to make this a harder thing to accomplish, to get land claims settled in this country.

Canada's aboriginal people are no longer content to just sit patiently while Ottawa gets around to finally addressing their concerns. They are idle no more. Congratulations to First Nations. Congratulations should come from all Canadians. We are glad they are idle no more. We are glad they are standing up for their rights. We are glad they are standing up for the land and the environment. These are things that have to be done. They are not getting done by the government. First Nations can provide the leadership.

Canada's First Nations want full settlement of their claims on traditional territories and will not wait while federal negotiators play games. They will be idle no more when it comes to getting these claims settled.

Canada's aboriginal people want to be treated fairly. They want to build the economies of their communities and regions. They are not opposed to development. I have shown that. They want to be full partners in development have a say in how it occurs. However because of delays by the federal government, they are no longer willing to wait.

Canadians should get behind them. Let us all be idle no more when it comes to First Nation issues.