

From the House

By Dennis Bevington MP Western Arctic

Bill C 15, the NWT Devolution Implementation Bill currently working its way through Parliament, will be discussed in Yellowknife on January 27th. The Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development has been tasked with holding hearings on the Bill and stakeholders have been invited to make presentations.

All Parties in the House have supported the Bill in principle during the first debate held in December, although the inclusion of the changes to the regulatory system and the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act (MVRMA) are troublesome as the Conservatives have chosen to bundle all of these initiatives into one omnibus Bill.

Both the Gwich'in and the Tlicho have strongly opposed the creation of the Super Board which is to replace the Regional Land and Water Boards that have been in place for the past decade. Grand Chief Eddie Erasmus took the opportunity at a reception hosted by the Tlicho in Ottawa on December 11th to criticize the Conservative Government saying that the Tlicho would take all actions possible to protect their Agreement, and the Wek'èezhìi Land and Water Board, which have been working extremely well.

In a letter sent in September of this year to Minister Valcourt, I requested that he present the Devolution Bill separately from the regulatory changes to the MVRMA. In talks with the Tlicho delegation in Ottawa last month, they confirmed that the two proposals were always presented as separate Bills in the consultation process and that there was no indication they would be combined.

The Government of the NWT has now said that it supports the creation of the Super Board. This is a change from its position two years ago when they opposed this idea in a letter to the previous Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan. Although the Legislative Assembly has voted in favour of the Devolution Agreement, this Agreement is silent on any changes to the MVRMA.

Questions remain. Has Premier Macleod received any formal support from the Legislative Assembly for the GNWT's changing position? Was the GNWT forced into supporting the Super Board to

get its Devolution package forward? In our consensus style politics, was this radical change discussed openly?

As a long-time advocate for the end of Ottawa's influence over the development of our resources in the NWT, I am willing to support the devolution aspects of this Bill. But as a past Co-Chair of the Constitutional Development Steering Committee prior to Division of the NWT, I have strong misgivings about the direction that the imposition of a Super Board will take us.

The Inuvialuit through their claim will retain their regional strength, a structure that will ensure a distinct presence in decision making on their traditional lands. The same should continue for the settled First Nations Governments in the NWT. The Regional Boards have provided that, to a degree that has been acceptable. The remaining unsettled claimant groups, including the Metis need to finish out the process that they are currently involved in.

The Super Board inclusion is therefore unnecessary and therefore nothing more than ill-conceived manipulation by the Conservative Government which may sow seeds of greater discord in the future.

I suppose we could accept Premier Macleod's placating that perhaps in five years or so the Federal Government would be willing to reconsider the MVRMA but by that time the Super Board will well established, and difficult to change.

As Grand Chief Erasmus says, "Why change something that isn't broken?"