

The House of Commons' emergency Attawapiskat debate – April 13, 2016

Hon. Jody Wilson-Raybould (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member across the way for Timmins—James Bay for providing us with this very important opportunity to have this substantive discussion. I certainly want to acknowledge all members who are in the House to participate in this debate.

I am very proud to come from the small community of We Wai Kai, off the west coast of British Columbia. I am proud to be an indigenous person standing in this honourable House to speak to this important subject, the issues of indigenous peoples in our country, and to participate in the debate.

I add my name to the many names of people who have spoken with respect to the incredibly sad situation that exists in Attawapiskat, and in communities like La Loche and so many indigenous communities across the country, where we see conditions of poverty, despair and lack of hope. As an indigenous person who was raised to be proud of who I am and where I come from, when I look at indigenous communities across the country, I want to ensure that we collectively create that sense of hope and that sense that if they work hard, they can achieve anything they want to in our country.

I want to applaud all of the members who have spoken to this issue and who recognize that immediate measures need to take place within the community of Attawapiskat, and other communities.

I am here today as the Minister of Justice and a member of this honourable House, and I would like to speak to the critical work that is ahead of us all.

I thank my colleagues, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, for recognizing the importance of not only addressing the immediate needs and the situation that exists, but for understanding the need for meaningful and systemic change. We, in the House, must not lose sight of the role this change will have in ensuring the health and safety of communities like Attawapiskat. Collectively, we must chart a path forward.

The Prime Minister has tasked us to work with indigenous peoples to establish a nation-to-nation relationship that is based on recognition. A relationship based on recognition is transformative. It is a relationship based on respect, co-operation, and partnership. In doing so, we can make real progress.

As the former regional chief of the BC Assembly of First Nations, I had the great fortune and opportunity to work with the chiefs and community leaders in British Columbia to develop mechanisms and to build institutions of government to assist first nations in the transition. I did this as well as a council member in my home community of We Wai Kai.

Indigenous peoples from across the country are at an important juncture in our history as they seek to deconstruct their colonial legacy and rebuild their communities. We all have a role to play. Even with political will, support and resources, only the colonized can decolonize themselves.

Change is not easy. It is not easy to remove the shackles of 140 years of life under the Indian Act. Our government, and I hope all members of this honourable House, is committed to ensuring that we work in partnership with indigenous peoples to do just that. Relationships with indigenous peoples in Canada are of paramount importance, and we are committed to renewed relationships that recognize that

solutions to one of the biggest outstanding public policy issues in our country need to be addressed in a substantive way.

For Attawapiskat, and for all first nations, the Indian Act is not a suitable system of government. It is not consistent with the rights enshrined in our Constitution, the principles as set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or the calls to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.
(2010)

In addition to the need for social and economic support urgently needed in Attawapiskat, all first nations, all indigenous peoples, need to be empowered to take back control of their own lives in partnership and with the full support of all Canadians. The good news is there are examples of how this can happen. There are successes in indigenous communities across the country, and we need to build on those successes.

The problem is that those successes are few and far between. Change has not happened quickly enough nor evenly throughout our great country, and Attawapiskat is one of those places. Our government is committed to establishing a nation-to-nation relationship, one, as the hon. member across the way said a moment ago, that respects an approach that will lay the framework for true reconciliation with indigenous peoples.

I have a few more words to say, Mr. Speaker, but I am pleased to share my time with the member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River.

For indigenous peoples, the challenge is not easy. It is complex. Indeed, for far too long it has been ignored as a task, as too difficult and monumental. However, we can and must do better. This work, as has been said, is non-partisan. It is broader than the Department of Justice and it does not fall only to the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

A nation-to-nation relationship is one of the most challenging public policy issues of our time, and I challenge all members of the House to work with us in building this relationship. There are no quick fixes to these issues. A substantive nation-to-nation discussion with indigenous peoples is needed. We need to sit down and work jointly to ensure that indigenous communities are strong and healthy, and in charge and in control of their own destiny. We need to bring life to and move beyond the scattered programs and initiatives. Reconciliation is a national project that requires full engagement and commitment at the highest levels of government.

This transformative work in Canada is far from complete. Some positive steps have been made. There have been positive steps made in the budget but more needs to be done. We need to develop a national reconciliation framework in partnership with indigenous communities, and that requires the support of all parties and all members in the House. That reconciliation framework needs to survive the life of one government.

We have incredible challenges to meet with respect to our relationship with our indigenous peoples. We have incredible opportunities to gain from engaging substantively. As the Minister of Justice and as one of the members in this honourable House, I look to international minimum standards that are articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We need to ensure that we look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations. We need to ensure, with

respect to our relationship with indigenous peoples in the country, that we put it in place in terms of the constitutional relationship that is required with respect to section 35. We need to ensure that we breathe life into section 35 and that we complete the unfinished business of Confederation.

In doing so, we will have strong and appropriate governance in first nations communities wherein they have moved beyond the Indian Act. We can ensure that they are benefiting from the economy, that they are playing a substantive role in our country, ensuring the ultimate objective that I believe every Canadian wants to achieve, which is to improve his or her quality of life. In assisting indigenous communities to improve their quality of life, we can ensure that the amazing cultures, languages, traditions and the pride that I felt and was taught, rooted in the potlatch which is our governing system, is felt in indigenous communities and within indigenous youth. This is our national project of reconciliation. I look forward to every member of the House standing with us and ensuring we can achieve that.

Gilakas'la.
(2015)