

Reformer blasts DIA over SN lawsuit

by Paul Barnsley

OTTAWA - A Reform Party member from BC used the Six Nations lawsuit over landclaims as a springboard to attack government secrecy surrounding landclaim negotiations.

Dick Harris, Reform MP for Prince George - Bulkley Valley B.C., launched his attack on the Department of Indian Affairs from the floor of the House of Commons after his questions regarding Six Nations' lawsuit against the Province of Ontario and the federal government went unanswered.

Reformers in B.C. have been critical of Premier Mike Harcourt's closed-door negotiation of landclaims in that province.

"During Question Period on

Friday, March 17, I asked the government for clarification on this issue with the specific intent of discovering whether the federal government was going to finance the Six Nation reserve lawsuit," Harris said.

Harris was told that the he would soon receive a response from the minister of Indian Affairs. Several days later, the Reformer rose to address the Commons again.

"To this moment I have yet to receive a response. This is a very serious court challenge and I am astonished that the government, considering the \$400 billion estimate, was unable to respond to my question on Friday. I am shocked by the fact

that I have yet to receive a response from the minister's department as I was promised," he said in the House the following Tuesday. "However, I suppose this is typical of how the government and many provincial governments have been dealing with Native issues. They prefer the response of simply no response."

"Questions are left unanswered," Harris continued. "Public debate is quashed. Negotiations are held in private and the taxpayer is left to pick up the bill. The Department of Indian Affairs has sacred cow status among Liberals. I point to the recent budget as evidence of this claim. I have no fear in tak-

ing up the dagger of accountability and leading this sacred cow to to the altar of public scrutiny in order to determine exactly where these billions and billions of dollars in the Department of Indian Affairs go."

The parliamentary secretary to the Minister of National Defence, Fred Mifflin, handled that question on behalf of DIA minister Ron Irwin who was not in the House. Mifflin said DIA has not advanced any funds to Six Nations for the legal action. He added the \$400 billion figure was not included in the notice of intention to litigate that Six Nations provided to the govern-

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ment last December.

"The Six Nations have apparently chosen to pursue litigation rather than negotiate the outstanding specific claims. Under the specific claims policy, claims cannot be pursued in court and considered under the claims policy at the same time. The board has been informed that all Six Nations claims had to be held in abeyance and that the files would be closed," the government spokesman said.

Mifflin also said Six Nations did not warn the government prior to December 1994 that it did not intend to stay within the confines of the specific claims process.

The Reform Party seems, based on Harris' statements in the House, to be attempting to embarrass the government for funding a lawsuit against itself.

Six Nations Land Research Director, Phil Monture, says the government response the Six

Nations landclaim has been to take tough action. Funding for Land Research, itself, has not yet been threatened but letters

from the Specific Claims office informed council their landclaim files have been closed and will be held in abeyance pend-

ing the out-come of the legal action. The letters emphasize the claims have not been rejected by Canada.