

them from me in a verbal passage such as this. This is what I have to say:

As honourable senators will be aware, the question of Senate reform has taken on a new prominence in the past several weeks.

Senator Frith: Is the honourable senator speaking for the government now?

Senator Roblin: I am speaking for the government.

This was not originally a matter which ranked high on the government's agenda for legislative action. It has been said before, and I will repeat today, that the mandate given to the government on September 4 last, and the first priority for the government, is to ensure that Canada's economy is put back on track. It was only as a result of the actions of Liberal senators with respect to Bill C-11 that the government was prompted to consider certain aspects of Senate reform.

Needless to say, there has been a great number of studies and reports on this issue. The very existence of this plethora of studies gives substance to the proposition that the Senate, as presently constituted and functioning, has failed to meet public expectations in 1985 and therefore stands in need of reform. At the same time we must ensure that we do not act precipitately in this respect.

Our constitutional amendment formula grants the provinces a voice in any discussion of Senate reform. Alterations in the powers of the Senate would require the consent of seven provinces with at least half of the national population. The Constitution does not provide for the abolition of the Senate. If it were to be undertaken, it would undoubtedly require the unanimous consent of the 10 provinces. From that standpoint, it is not a viable option. Instead of abolition, most of the provinces want reform. They understand the role that a second chamber can and should play in a federal system of government. In any event, the government is not prepared to act in a unilateral fashion.

Recognizing that the provinces have a legitimate role to play in the process of Senate reform, the government has initiated a process of consultation with representatives of provincial governments. The government will decide on its final course of action only after provincial views on Senate reform are fully understood.

If our discussions with the provinces produce a consensus, we will, of course, meet with our colleagues from both sides of the House of Commons and the Senate to discuss the timetable for reform and the most appropriate means of bringing the matter before Parliament.

I hope that statement will provide some information to honourable senators.

Senator MacEachen: Honourable senators, I want to make what might be described as a brief comment on the statement by the Leader of the Government. I want to make it clear that the persons whom the Leader of the Government described as Liberal senators still believe that they acted properly in their conduct with respect to Bill C-11.

[Senator Roblin.]

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator MacEachen: All the threats that were made prior to the action we took did not deter us from that course of action. I believe that, as time goes on, that course of action will be justified, as it is justified in our minds. Whatever justification there is for Senate change and, indeed, there is justification, to link it to this particular action taken with respect to Bill C-11 is an extraordinary over-reaction by the government itself.

I do not want to go beyond these preliminary remarks in reply to the comments made by the Leader of the Government.

Although the Leader of the Government may have implicitly provided the answers, I want to know explicitly whether the government has settled on a proposal or a series of proposals, or whether it has merely settled on a series of options. Is the conversation with the provinces based on a series of options or proposals agreed to by the Government of Canada, or is the conversation merely exploratory? I think it is important to know whether the government has settled on ideas, proposals or options which it has conveyed to the provinces, or whether it has opened up the question in a general way and said, "What is your reaction to changes to the Senate?"

Senator Roblin: I am glad my honourable friend is satisfied with his conduct; it would be strange if he were not. I am not altogether sure that he will meet with unanimous agreement with that in view of recent transactions in the Senate.

Senator MacEachen: I am sure I will not.

Senator Roblin: My honourable friend is really asking me: What has the government put on the table in discussion with the provinces? Is it a proposal? Is it a number of alternatives? Or what is it?

Of course, the answer to that question will be made known to the public and to my honourable friend when those discussions are concluded. It would obviously be futile for me to try to negotiate those terms or outline the government's position on the floor of this chamber.

Senator MacEachen: Honourable senators, the Leader of the Government is not under any great disability in answering this question. I want to know whether the government has put forward specific proposals to the provinces.

Senator Roblin: If the honourable gentleman is asking me whether the government has submitted specific proposals, but is not following that up by asking what they are, I can say, yes, the government has submitted specific proposals; there are several of them.

Senator MacEachen: I thank the Leader of the Government. I will not ask his suggested question at this point.

Is it true to say the government has presented a series of options to the provinces rather than a series of proposals? Are they proposals or options? That is what I want to know.

Senator Roblin: I am sorry; I cannot make any further statement on that matter.

Senator MacEachen: Not revealing whether the government has made up its mind on specific proposals to the provinces, I