

Dominion-Provincial Conference

Nor will that performance of the Prime Minister change my intention, supported by my colleagues in caucus this morning when we discussed this issue, to express my party's general position and hopes on some of the more important aspects before us under the heading of constitutional revision. Obviously I cannot cover them all. Let me say this, however, in replying to the Prime Minister. He challenged opposition parties to give answers to questions. I see the Prime Minister has just entered the chamber. Probably he had as hasty a lunch as I had, and I can understand his being a few minutes late. He challenged the opposition to give answers to questions. I say, Mr. Speaker, that the government of Canada, which includes the Prime Minister and other ministers, has refused until now to give answers about the most important constitutional problem before this country. If the Prime Minister points to the paper which was tabled just before the conference, let me say this. That paper dealt with the structures of government and with some important structural problems; it dealt with bilingualism, which is important, and with the entrenchment of human rights, which is also important. But it did not deal with what the Prime Minister himself said was the most pressing problem, namely, the division of power, the extent of the federal spending power, and the like. I say it does not lie well in his mouth to taunt members of the opposition and say they ought to give answers to these problems when, so far as the public is concerned and so far as the members of this parliament are concerned, we have not heard even the suggestion of an answer from him.

At the conference which concluded on Wednesday and which I observed with interest throughout he did not suggest any answer to the problem of spending powers. He simply said to the provincial representatives, "You tell us what they should be and how you want them reduced, increased, confined or limited." At no point did he give an answer.

Mr. Trudeau: Would the hon. member permit a question? Does he not remember that it was three of the provinces which during the last month themselves demanded that the subject be put on the agenda although it had not been dealt with by the continuing committee of officials and therefore was not expected to be a subject of discussion between the governments?

Mr. Lewis: Mr. Speaker, I agree on both parts of the right hon. gentleman's question. I agree with the implication of his question that he did not understand the problem enough to put it on the agenda, and he had to be asked by the provincial premiers to do so. I agree that because it was put on at the last minute no one expected it to be discussed. I say the partisan job he did this morning was not only unbecoming of him but thoroughly unfair. It was unfair of him to ask members of the opposition to provide blueprints for the constitution in a one-day debate when, with the assistance of a continuing committee and a large staff which has increased by more than 100 per cent, he has not yet found it possible to answer these important questions himself.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Lewis: I also say, in reply to the Prime Minister's unbecoming taunt, that these matters would have been discussed in depth had he and his predecessor agreed to the appointment of a parliamentary committee for which members of the opposition have asked for four or five years. No one speaking for 20, 30 or 40 minutes in any debate can make satisfactory suggestions as to what the constitution should be like. No one has sufficient knowledge at his fingertips to assist the Prime Minister in the way he suggests we ought to assist him.

Mr. Stanfield: He would not listen, anyway.

Mr. Lewis: If a committee had been established and had met in the course of the last two or three years many of these subjects would have been discussed in depth and many suggestions would have come from both sides of the house. I am glad the Prime Minister has now agreed to the establishment of such a parliamentary committee. I express the hope the Leader of the Opposition expressed, that the terms of reference will not be restricted only to those subjects on which the continuing committee has already reported, as the Prime Minister suggested the other day would happen. If that is the case, again we will not have the opportunity to discuss partition of powers, the extent of federal spending power and all the other basic social and economic questions about which the constitution must be concerned. That is where the kind of discussion the Prime Minister rightly wants could have taken place earlier and will take place if the reference to the committee is not too restrictive.