

Hon. Royce Frith (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Read the rest.

The Hon. the Speaker: If it is a question of the definition of "preamble", I believe that preambles should be as short as possible.

Senator Frith: Introductory comments are permitted.

Hon. Raymond J. Perrault: Of course introductory comments are permitted! I have talked about the general strategy of the government under the direction of the supreme ruler, the Right Honourable the Prime Minister. I should like to ask the Leader of the Government in the Senate: What was the basis for this strategy? Will he confirm, as the Prime Minister stated, and as reported in the interview in the *Globe and Mail*, that negotiations were left until the final hours in order to exert maximum pressure on the participants? The Prime Minister then said that he had decided at some point that he should roll the dice. Did the Leader of the Government help roll the dice? Is this the kind of tactic—

Senator Flynn: Order!

Senator Perrault:—that was designed to achieve the agreement of all the provinces?

Senator Flynn: Order!

Senator Perrault: Tell me, as we would like to know more about this strategy.

Senator Flynn: Order!

Senator Perrault: Why did he not initiate—

Senator Flynn: Order!

Senator Perrault:—meetings with the leaders of the provincial governments—

Senator Flynn: Mr. Speaker, order!

Senator Perrault:—or the first ministers well before the deadline date established?

Senator Flynn: Order!

Senator Perrault: Why did he not avoid the prospect of having this kind of crisis situation at the last minute? Let us hear the explanation.

● (1610)

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government and Minister of State for Federal-Provincial Relations): Honourable senators, first, I would commend to the honourable senator the statements that have been made since the first ministers' conference by distinguished first ministers such as Premier Peterson of Ontario and Premier Vander Zalm of his own province, who have a version of the events that is far different from that presented by Senator Perrault.

Secondly, so far as the Prime Minister's interview with *The Globe and Mail* is concerned, I would suggest that the honourable senator obtain a transcript of that interview and read it carefully and see the context in which the questions were asked and answered.

Thirdly, on the basis of my own direct involvement in the matter, I ask the honourable senator to consider this: There was a first ministers' conference, held in November, at which the positions especially of Newfoundland, Manitoba and New Brunswick were made very clear. There was very little common ground among those provinces, which were hold-out provinces, and no reason in the world to believe that another first ministers' conference at that time on Meech Lake would succeed.

In the first few weeks of 1990 I toured the provincial capitals and met with all the premiers. I tried to promote the idea of what Premier McKenna called a parallel accord, a political agreement among the first ministers that would lead to a resolution of the problem. After that tour, it was very clear to me, and to everybody else, that the idea of a parallel accord was not going to fly. The differences were still too great among Manitoba, Newfoundland and New Brunswick. Manitoba still wanted to reopen the accord and amend it. Newfoundland, in effect, wanted to start all over. Indeed, Premier Wells put forward what I might call the "Wells Accord" to deal with each of the issues in the Meech Lake Accord.

It was clear at that point that there was no way that a first ministers' conference on Meech Lake would have succeeded. We waited until mid-March before Premier McKenna came up with his very positive initiative, a companion resolution that would enable Meech Lake to be passed, but none of the provisions of which could be proclaimed until after Meech Lake had been proclaimed. The federal government took the action that we thought constructive under the circumstances; namely, we appointed a parliamentary committee. We gave the parliamentary committee six weeks to hold public hearings and to report, which they did on May 17 or 18. That left us with a couple of weeks to do some further consultations among provincial premiers and to call the conference.

Up to a matter of days before that conference was called I was still in consultation, on behalf of the federal government, with various provincial premiers about some very specific matters that were at stake.

Finally, when the meeting was held, the Prime Minister was in a position to say to the premiers at the opening dinner, "It appears that there are only two important issues still outstanding. One is a process issue; how to obtain the needed assurance that the improvements or add-ons will be made. The second matter is the amending formula as it relates to Senate reform." That was on Sunday night. None of us—no one in this place and no one at that table—would have believed that it would have taken a full week to resolve those issues. Most of us, myself included, thought the meeting would be over by Tuesday. It was not over until the following Saturday, and, indeed, on the final Friday night the first ministers were still discussing the amending formula as it related to Senate reform.

So the inference drawn by the honourable senator and others that a deliberate attempt was made (a) to leave the meeting until the last minute and (b) to prolong the meeting is