

The Constitution

● (2020)

[English]

Hon. Alvin Hamilton (Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain): Mr. Speaker, my first words must be, after listening Monday, Tuesday, and the little there was on Wednesday to this debate, that the high quality of most of the speakers has raised this debate far above the level of most debates in this House over the last 25 years. This does not mean that all the speeches were of high quality, but the high quality of most of them should be commented upon. When I use the words high quality, I include such adjectives as sincerity and deep thought, both of which have been put into the speeches in the House. It bears out what has always been the case when we discuss a subject like the constitution, that it requires a tremendous amount of thought trying to think our way through the points which are raised, not for the first time, it is true, but for the first time in the last ten or 12 years.

The constitution was the prevailing subject during the 1930s. It became clear that the weaker provinces under the terms and organization then existing were not able to meet the economic and social costs of a world-wide recession as well as the richer provinces. Then, after tremendous discussion, we moved on and under a royal commission headed by Rowell and then Sirois, the equalization principle came into being.

Now, 40 years later, it has come into the consciousness of the Canadian people that it is time we discuss the matter again. I think we owe a debt to the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) for suggesting that all members should speak in this debate. That is going to take some time. With the quality of the speeches which we have been hearing, I think it would be very unwise for him to change his view on that proposal.

I want to mention the speech of the Right Hon. Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark), particularly the last five minutes. I watched the faces of those who were in this House across from him and those behind him, which I could see much better on the television monitor.

All members were watching intently. When my leader came down to his conclusion that even though all parties wanted patriation, because it is a matter of national pride, and even though all parties were willing to take a look at what reforms they could bring to the constitution, we had to be aware of the significance of section 42. The impact which was made showed up, not only in the faces of the members, but in the shock effect across this nation as people got a second dose of what they had seen at the first ministers' conference.

At the first ministers' conference we saw a situation across the country whereby through every technique known to modern communications we were told that the Prime Minister would face a united group of provincial premiers, all of whom opposed him. When we saw the conference on television and heard it over the radio we found instead ten sincere, able men putting forward different views which made a lot of sense. Obviously, there was not agreement between the Prime Minister and the premiers, but there was no massing or ganging up.

The people of Canada were proud that there was a difference because they instinctively understand that this is a very important and complex problem. They were proud that men could put forward different views so sincerely and ably, and they knew that this country was in good hands.

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Instead of taking that disagreement among the provinces as a sign of weakness in this country, it should be taken as a sign of strength. People are going to have different viewpoints because there is no human being in the whole world who can say for sure at this time what is the right thing to do on the subject we are discussing.

Let us take the idea of federalism. The word is now used openly and proudly but that has only come about in the last few years. When the Right Hon. Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) served notice that he stood for a federal system, for the first time many people in Canada knew what he stood for. They got the idea that they have always known to be true, that this was the same concept as we had in 1867. We as Canadians knew in 1867 that it would be impossible to run a country as diverse, a country with so much geography, as a unitarian state. The same view prevailed in the United States in 1787 when men like Alexander Hamilton, keen exponents of a strong central government, listened to the discussion of that unique group in Philadelphia and came down for the first time in history on behalf of the unique form of government, the federal system.

This federal system follows something that we know instinctively to be right—wherever possible, keep government close to the people. It gives a better class of government. You have to have a strong central government, but you can only have a strong central government when you do everything you can to make the other levels of government as strong as possible too. That is the concept of federalism.

There is no such thing as a compact in federalism, just as there is no such thing as a compact in the human body. An arm is an arm is an arm; it is part of the body and you cannot ask the arm to go one way and be different. I am simply saying that the concept of federalism was stated, by the Leader of the Opposition in one or two sentences, more powerfully and clearly than I have ever heard it stated before.

The speech impressed many people. Also, I have no choice but to mention the speech of the hon. member for Yorkton-Melville (Mr. Nystrom). He certainly surprised me. I have listened to him off and on for ten or 12 years and now, all of a sudden, when I heard him come out and in unequivocal terms support the concept of federalism as expressed by the Leader of the Opposition, I had to pay attention and listen very closely.

The House may not understand the significance of that but from a Saskatchewan point of view where we have witnessed this violent political clash for the last 50 years, to hear a socialist saying he believed in a federal system bringing government close to the people wherever possible, letting them make the decisions was, to my mind, revolutionary.