

Federal-Provincial Fiscal Arrangements

al-provincial negotiation, is presented in this House. One wonders what possessed the leader of the NDP to come to the conclusion that he did. Since his party's popularity remains at 16 per cent, one wonders why he spends time flailing away in his speeches at the Conservative party instead of dealing with the merits of the bill or its shortcomings, as he sees them.

Like the provinces in so many cases when dealing with this particularly parsimonious government, we too in the opposition are faced with a "take it or leave it" proposition. To accept this bill is to accept that which we feel is far from perfect, and moreover that which we, if we were in the government, would never force the provinces to accept. But to oppose it unconditionally would leave us in a similarly tenuous position, for quite obviously, this bill represents a development in Canadian politics and in the Canadian constitutional system that has far-reaching consequences for the institution of parliament and parliament's relevance to the country.

My party's former leader, the hon. member for Halifax (Mr. Stanfield), said recently in Edmonton that the House of Commons is the only truly national forum in Canada, made up of citizens from all walks of life and regions in this vast country. Yet despite this the House of Commons has had little, if any, influence upon this bill or upon the entire constitutional debate that has gone on in the country, particularly since the present Prime Minister headed the government in 1968. I believe that this is one of the most important reasons for the failure of that particular debate which ended in the rejection of the Victoria charter, and it is why I feel that the Prime Minister's expressed desire to repatriate the constitution before an amending formula is adopted will similarly end in failure. Such far-reaching discussions cannot be carried on solely at the executive and bureaucratic level without any input from the ordinary representatives of the Canadian people in the House of Commons and in the provincial legislatures.

Professor Donald Smiley has called the process in which the Prime Minister, or the finance minister, or the minister of health and welfare, meet with their provincial counterparts and with senior bureaucrats "executive federalism".

● (2100)

Bill C-37 is another example of what amounts to federal-provincial diplomacy, with the House of Commons serving as little more than a rubber stamp to ratify what could be described as a treaty between foreign governments.

This whole process of executive federalism, of dealing with the constitutional system of the country at only the highest and, in most cases, the most remote levels of government, belittles the House of Commons, renders the opposition meaningless, and contributes to a sense of the high-level confrontations between political stars which heighten rather than reduce the centrifugal forces inherent in federal systems of government.

It is this point, the habit of the present government to play one region against another to its own advantage, that I want to discuss this evening. As a federal politician coming from western Canada I feel that I would be remiss in my duty to my

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

constituents and to my colleagues here in the House of Commons if I were not to bring to the attention of the government, as I did, the feeling which does exist in western Canada with respect to the state of affairs we find in our national government.

It is very easy to dismiss this feeling of hostility as the manifestation of grievances against a remote government in Ottawa which has very little electoral support in the west. What one sees, however, is a turning of this grievance away from criticism of the Liberal government to a criticism of Confederation itself. As I have pointed out, up to this point the talk on western separatism has been shallow and confined to a few malcontents, but it is disturbing to a federal member of parliament and to a member of a party which stands for a strong and united Canada in which regional and cultural differences are enriched through contacts established across the entire country to witness the emotional response such separatist talk elicits in many people.

Politicians and academics tend to underestimate the value and power of symbols in the political culture of a country. Unfortunately for those who espouse the federalist ideal, the symbols which are associated with that ideal are in many regions of the country being weakened and attacked as irrelevant, or even harmful to the legitimate aspirations of the citizens in those particular regions.

It is difficult to fix blame for this because the problem is so complex and ambiguous, but surely the role of the federal government is not to exacerbate such feelings of discontent within Confederation because of its fiscal inflexibility, its stubborn refusal to amend policies which offend particular regions—such policies as transportation in the west, or perhaps cable television within the province of Quebec and elsewhere—and its attempt to dump on to the provinces, as my friend, the hon. member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather), would say, the fiscal burden to provide for programs that it in previous years initiated.

As my party's leader pointed out in opening this debate this bill does not represent the real meaning of Confederation but rather the means by which our federal system is operated. But what is important in this bill is not so much the revenue-sharing agreement between the provinces and the federal government but the manner by which this bill was conceived—in bureaucratic isolation, imposed upon the provinces, and then presented as an accomplished fact to parliament for its cursory approval.

I want to joint in the statements made by my leader in opening this debate, and I urge upon the government during the remainder of its mandate to regard its federal-provincial relationships from a substantially different viewpoint than it has taken up to this time. Unless this happens we are going to suffer difficulties until the next election, but I can assure hon. members that after the next election a Conservative government will pay fair and reasonable attention to the regions of our country, to the betterment of the whole.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!