

*The Address—Miss F. MacDonald*

There are few members of this House who would challenge the desirability of establishing a Canadian mechanism for constitutional amendment. There are few members who would challenge the desirability of making parliament more efficient. That is not at issue. But we on this side of the House believe that the pre-eminent government priority in Canada today must be to deal with inflation.

Inflation is not some temporary problem. It is not some problem that has limited or short-term effects. Inflation is a problem which attacks the essential fabric of our society. It is a problem which breeds economic despair and social instability and, if left unchecked, political collapse. Democracy is far less threatened by the ponderous workings of this House than by the spreading and virulent disease of inflation.

Each day in this House, in the newspapers, on television and radio there is a litany of symptoms. The focus is, of course, on the short-term effects. But beyond the immediate suffering there is the more ominous erosion of the security of middle and lower-middle income earners. There is the destruction of savings and retirement funds, the threat of a poverty so widespread that only the wealthiest and most powerful members of society will be able to protect themselves.

The government's failure to show any leadership in dealing with inflation can only serve to aggravate the problem. Each day that the government fails to act it contributes to the psychology of inflation. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) have already made just such a contribution by implying, in their description of inflation as an international problem, that it is a problem beyond Canadian control. The consequence has been to persuade large numbers of Canadians that the government will not act.

The Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance have helped create an atmosphere in which it is widely believed that the only way to survive is to forget any sense of collective responsibility and fend for oneself. Thus, each new increase in wages or salaries provides a justification for another increase. Each new increase in prices provides justification for another increase. Labour can blame rising prices and business can blame the rising cost of labour.

Thomas Hobbes wrote that "Outside of civil states there is always war of everyone against every one". That may be a pessimistic view of human nature, but it fairly characterizes the consequences of inflationary psychology. Every man is set at war with every other man. Surely the government has a responsibility to bring this under control. The government is not powerless. It can deal with this aspect of the problem of inflation very simply. It can give Canada some moral leadership. It can give the Canadian people a demonstration of concern, some evidence of its commitment to act.

Instead of boasting about how well we are doing, the Minister of Finance should tell us how we can do better. The Minister of Finance is like a man standing at the upraised end of a sinking ship telling those around him that they are more fortunate than those at the submerged end. It is time he realized that he is on the same ship.

[Miss MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands).]

Instead of feuding in public the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) and the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Ouellet) should try to find a means to reconcile the interests of consumers and producers. The Prime Minister's tolerance of this dispute is a measure of his failure to understand the problem of inflation. These two ministers are offering encouragement to the kind of forces which are helping to spread inflation. Group is set against group. Interest is set against interest. There is no attempt to reconcile conflicting interests.

There is no attempt to educate, or re-educate public opinion to the necessity for mutual restraint. And that, Mr. Speaker, is the foundation of a healthy democratic society: a recognition of mutual interest, a willingness to compromise, to find accommodation. The Prime Minister ignores this necessity, to pursue his obsession with remodelling the institutions of government. And what does the Prime Minister intend with his reforms in our parliament? Every institutional initiative he has ever taken has had the effect of centralizing power in the executive branch.

One can only suspect that the Prime Minister and those around him ultimately define rationality as the process which recognizes their superior ability to decide. All will be rational when they are freed from the fetters of scrutiny and criticism, particularly that of the opposition. If that is not what they intend, let the Prime Minister tell us, instead of lecturing us on protocol, what he proposes to do to ensure that members on this side of the House can more effectively execute their responsibilities.

The existence of vigorous opposition has been held to be central to the preservation of a healthy parliamentary democracy. Every member of this House, not just those on the other side, is a representative of the Canadian people. Will the Prime Minister help members of this House to be more effective representatives? For example, will he guarantee public access to the publicly-financed reports on which government policy is based? Will he give committees the resources to conduct proper investigations? Will he instruct his colleagues and members of the public service who appear before parliamentary bodies to answer the questions which are posed to them?

Our previous experience with the Prime Minister's concept of institutional reform affords little confidence that his understanding of efficiency will produce more effective public policy. The Prime Minister's obsession with institutional rationalization during his first administration produced a complete restructuring of relationships at the highest level of the executive branch of government, and these changes were made, we were told, to permit government to develop more effective long-term policy.

Does the Prime Minister recall his announcement on December 24, 1970 that inflation no longer exists in Canada? The vaunted mechanisms for rational long-term planning failed to anticipate changes that have gathered momentum to culminate in the present inflationary crisis. The Prime Minister will forgive us if we are skeptical about the efficacy of his institutional tinkering.

There is no more compelling illustration of the failure of the new style of decision making than the tragic miscalculation made by his government in trying to restrict agricultural production in 1971. Canadian farmers only three years ago were paid cash incentives to reduce their