

Inquiries of the Ministry

Finance in a position to answer the questions asked the other day in connection with the conference of provincial treasurers which opens next Monday in Ottawa?

Hon. Donald M. Fleming (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, I have now seen the questions which were asked on Monday and Tuesday by the Leader of the Opposition in this respect while I was in Toronto in attendance on Her Majesty. So far as Monday's question is concerned, which asked if an invitation had been extended by the government to the premiers of the provinces to attend the conference, I may say that the answer is in the negative. This conference was designed as one of a financial nature, and the invitation was extended to the provincial treasurers or provincial ministers of finance. Of course no attempt was made to draw any limits or make any suggestions as to those whom the provincial treasurer or minister of finance might wish to have associated with him in the delegation representing the province.

There are three provinces in which the provincial treasurer or minister of finance is also the premier. They are British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. In these three cases the premier of the province will be attending in his capacity as provincial treasurer. We have also received from the treasurer of Prince Edward Island an intimation that the premier of that province will also be attending the conference with him. I have not had any communication from the province of Quebec in this respect, although references were made in a debate in the house several weeks ago to a newspaper report indicating that the prime minister of Quebec would be attending the conference along with the minister of finance of that province.

The question on Tuesday asked me to make some statement concerning the agenda to be brought before the conference. We prepared in the Department of Finance some weeks ago a quite comprehensive list of proposed subjects which included all those which had been suggested by any of the provinces in the course of the communications which had passed between Ottawa and the capitals of the provinces or which had been discussed in the course of the visit made to all the provincial capitals by the director of the dominion-provincial relations division of the Department of Finance.

This document, which was of a confidential nature, was submitted to all the provincial treasurers or provincial ministers of finance for their approval. I may say that we have had communications from a majority of the provincial treasurers in the meantime approving the proposed list of topics. I think we

[Mr. Pearson.]

have not yet heard from quite all but have heard from the majority of them.

Subject to the decision of the conference itself when it assembles next Monday, this list of proposed subjects will form the basis of discussion at the conference and in the further meeting to follow. It will involve on the part of the conference itself decisions with regard to priorities, selection, arrangement and then the reference to the meeting of the continuing committee of officials as the conference of ministers may decide.

Mr. Pearson: Did I understand the minister to say that no official communication had been received by him that the premier of Quebec would be attending?

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): I do not believe there has been any official communication on that subject. There had not been any, to my knowledge, up to the time I left for Toronto at the end of last week.

Hon. Paul Martin (Essex East): Can the Minister of Finance say whether any of the conference proceedings will be open to the public, as is usual on occasions when heads of government meet at such conferences; and in view of the strong statement made by Premier Roblin last week that he thought there should be held at the earliest possible moment a dominion-provincial conference at the usual level, is the hon. gentleman in a position to say, after his two-day absence from this house which undoubtedly has given him an opportunity for relaxation, whether there will be such a conference before the end of this calendar year in order to fulfil the promises made by the Prime Minister and the government?

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): Mr. Speaker, all promises made by the government have been fulfilled, and the government is continuing in the same worthy spirit to carry forward the work which is being done to repair the damage caused to dominion-provincial relations by our predecessors. While the task which has been handed on to us is not an easy one, we think we shall in time repair the damage that was done before we were entrusted with this responsibility.

I was asked whether these meetings would be open to the public. Again, this is a matter for decision of the conference itself. It is my understanding, and indeed this has been confirmed by the view of a considerable number of ministers who will be attending the conference, that having regard to the nature of the conference it ought to proceed in camera.

Hon. J. W. Pickersgill (Bonavista-Twillingate): I should like to ask the Prime Minister a question supplementary to those