

The Canadian Constitution

correspondence. Is it proposed to seek from the premiers some definite answer, or is it proposed to call a conference of some sort to see how far unanimity can go in these matters? To put it in a simple way, where do we go from here?

Mr. Trudeau: I made this suggestion in my letter to the premiers that if they wanted further discussion, or further elucidation of the various courses we were indicating, the Secretary for the Federal-Provincial Relations in the Privy Council Office, Mr. Gordon Robertson, would gladly meet the premiers or their officials, as indeed he has been meeting them over the past year, to explain further the contents of the present letter. I also indicated that, if the premiers so desired, at the meeting of first ministers which is planned for early May when we will be meeting to discuss the price of oil and gas, perhaps on that occasion, as was done last April, we might take a short time to seek out the opinions of the various premiers. Therefore, it is possible, and hopeful, that I will be receiving written communications before that, but I think it is to be expected that at that meeting we will take some little time in order to deal with this matter.

Mr. Brewin: If the premiers do respond to these letters and correspondence they have received from the Prime Minister, will this House be informed in due course, either by tabling or by way of a statement by the Prime Minister, so that we in parliament can be aware of the momentum with which this proposal is going forward?

• (1640)

Mr. Trudeau: Mr. Speaker, this is indeed in the realm of hypothesis. If there were to be quick agreement and consent by all concerned between now and the early part of May, and if other parties saw fit to adopt such resolutions quickly, certainly we on this side would be prepared to seek time between now and the end of June. I must indicate that this is only on the unlikely hypothesis that everybody is ready, willing, able and anxious to get it done that soon. As one of the premiers suggested last year, it would have been nice had we been able to do it at the time the Queen was in Canada. That did not indicate any kind of deadline on my part. I think this is something we can do just as easily during the next session as during this session, but I am completely in the hands of both houses of parliament and, of course, of those of the premiers as to the most appropriate time.

[Translation]

Mr. Lambert (Bellechasse): Mr. Speaker, I suppose that the right hon. Prime Minister has received and read the message addressed to all members of the Canadian Parliament by the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste of the province of Quebec. In this message, we can note the following, and I would like the Prime Minister to comment on this. I therefore quote from this message:

First, the federal government and the provinces should agree to a review of the present constitution which would recognize Canadian bi-nationalism as one of the constituting elements of the country, clearly establish the respective jurisdictions of the federal and provincial governments, clarify their power to collect taxes and spend money, and create a constitutional court with all guarantees of objectivity.

Second, once this review has been completed, an agreement should be made not only among the ten provinces, but also between the two

[Mr. Brewin.]

constituting nations of the country about a process for eventual constitutional amendments.

The last paragraph seems to come close to the idea that the Prime Minister has just expressed.

Finally, when both these conditions have been met, the British North America Act which constitutes our present constitution can be relinquished and the new constitution can be promulgated, which will patriate our constitution.

These are the wishes expressed in this message.

If the Prime Minister has read this message, could he make some comments on this subject if this is the procedure that he wants to follow?

Mr. Trudeau: Mr. Speaker, the answer is no. I take the liberty of saying to the hon. member for Bellechasse that this is not the view of the hon. member for Roberval, who is the spokesman for the Social Credit Party. He did not mention these matters at all on behalf of his party. Unless I am mistaken, he indicated two essential and fundamental conditions: the right of veto for Quebec and no action by the federal government to amend the constitution without the unanimous consent of the provinces. Those are the only two conditions he spelled out. The hon. member for Roberval nods his head in assent. I am very pleased to let him know that if he carefully reads the formula he will see that I propose these two conditions he rightly finds essential. They are in fact in the proposals I put forward. So I hope I can count on the support of the Social Credit Party for this gesture I want to make.

[English]

Mr. Gray: Mr. Speaker, I should like to ask the Prime Minister a question on the most worth while statement he has just made. In view of what all sides here agree to be the fundamental importance of the matter, would the Prime Minister be willing to have parliament, on behalf of the people of Canada, take a further real part in the ongoing discussion he contemplates with regard to bringing home our constitution and an appropriate amending formula for it, by having the documents he tabled today referred to a committee of parliament for consideration and public hearing, not necessarily immediately, but perhaps after the provincial premiers have made their initial replies, assuming of course, that they do not immediately agree with the government's proposal?

Mr. Trudeau: Mr. Speaker, I have no strong objection to this course, I would want to point out to the hon. member, however, that I think we would all be mistaken if we thought this problem could be solved by a committee of this House. I believe the studies of the constitution and, indeed, the attitude of spokesmen for various parties, indicates there is strong support for the general course of action being discussed here this afternoon. The next step is to see whether the provinces agree. If they do agree, I suggest that we should then, rather than now, refer it to a committee of the House for further consultation. If they do not agree, I think it might be a mistake but I will certainly consider the suggestion of the hon. member, to create a degree of expectation in the minds of the people of Canada that a committee of this House will in any way serve to get the province to change their minds.

I think the first step is to see whether the provinces agree. If they do agree I take it we will have no difficulty.