

Federal-Provincial Relations

The Prime Minister taxed Mr. Cournoyer with inefficiency and in the event of a dispute between him and his provincial opposite number, for the sake of cutting a good figure, another minister will be sent to mend the fences.

Mr. Speaker, that is a woeful picture. If such conflicts do exist, it is not because federalism is not practicable, but merely because it is being administered by petty politicians, intoxicated with power, financial or otherwise, who force their paltry views on the community, without consultation.

Briefly, Ottawa is a rich centralizer and the provinces, Quebec among them, are poor autonomists.

The conflict has become particularly intense over the past decade. And it is always waged on the financial field.

The federal government never says to the provinces that he wants to invade the fields that come under their jurisdiction: ownership, civil rights, education, social security. It said that it is was purely a financial matter or rather a fiscal matter for nowadays, the government and the treasury are almost synonymous in our country. But if you hold the purse-string, you control everything.

In this fight, Mr. Speaker, which divides unwitting federal centralists and blind provincial autonomists who is the winner? Doubtless it is the central government, especially for the past four years under the Trudeau administration which moreover takes its own decisions, be it in the fields of taxation, social security, budget policy, etc. without any consultations with the Canadian provinces.

The federal government never wins, but it keeps scoring. The autonomists, on the other hand, never yield, but still they keep losing ground. At all events, the gap is widening between those two levels of government; federalism is being questioned and this is unfortunate.

Anyhow, Mr. Speaker, Canadians are concerned over this situation and are losing confidence in these theories. They mistrust both systems because they also have to cope with a financial problem. The constitution, red carpet wrangling or flies are not what people are living on. What they want is to live in peace and security within a progressive social system.

Mr. Speaker, I ask this question: Why are the many constitutional conferences never getting us anywhere? The answer is quite simple: Ottawa, which is quite rich, arrives loaded with money, while provinces are short of cash. It is easy to discuss at a conference when one is rich and loaded with money, but one is necessarily short of cash when one is poor.

Indeed, successive invasions have enriched the invader and impoverished the provinces and this resulted in huge regional disparities which divide Canada as a puzzle. And it is really a problem for the government. It has set up the Department of Regional Economic Expansion with a view to eliminating those disparities. However today, after having made attempts and spent hundreds of million for several months, we are still in the same predicament. The Prime Minister said so recently in Victoriaville as well as the Minister of Economic Regional Expansion (Mr. Marchand) in Sherbrooke.

The entire country, Mr. Speaker, should now be called a designated area. In short, everybody and all levels of

[Mr. Fortin.]

government are in debt and in a financial strait jacket. If it were untrue, there would not be any Department of Regional Economic Expansion.

• (1720)

The existence alone of such a department shows that there are financial problems at all levels of government from coast to coast.

Mr. Speaker, the provinces, the municipalities and the federal government—the great indebted and stubborn one, which is about to be crushed under its public debt—are held in check by that financial strait-jacket. That is why the federal government, like a monster, levies more and more taxes, further restricting provincial spending powers, which accounts for the financial unrest where the provinces find themselves. The Prime Minister of Canada himself, who is at the head of the most centralizing and most indebted government this country has known and who keeps on adding to his own arrogance by his die-hard attitude, is himself a victim of that strait-jacket.

What is the result of that? Mr. Trudeau—I say that because I firmly believe it—is the best ally of the enemies of Canada's unity and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must remind the hon. member that whenever he is referring to a minister or to the Prime Minister, he must identify the latter by mentioning the official title instead of the person's name.

Mr. Fortin: I will not refer to that name anymore, Mr. Speaker, because I know it is a bad word for Canadians.

If they were rich, Quebec or the other provinces could approach the federal government or any interlocutor with a triumphant smile. It is in the field of artificial finance which is controlled by high finance, that centralization appears and develops. A people is born and can live where the financial field corresponds to facts. That is why we specifically blame this government for not having made available to the provinces enough credits to insure the development, economic growth and welfare of the people.

What is the basic problem in all provinces? Money! What is dealt with at all those federal-provincial or inter-provincial conferences? The financial problem. What are we waiting for before checking the financial powers and having them serve the equal partners in Confederation?

In a word, we must suppress all causes of conflict in order to have Canada reach real social peace. Since the conflict lies at the taxation level, since it is through taxes that centralists get to their victims and create a situation that all provinces consider unacceptable, why not simply do away with that antiquated method the governments use to finance their administrations?

Instead of emptying the precariously lined purses of the citizens, why not simply draw credits from the huge production and resource potential of Canada?

I cannot build a road or a bridge, or implement this programme because Ottawa has monopolized all hands, materials and skills. Such a stupid statement is never heard, but people always say that such or such a province is delaying the implementation of such or such a project or programme because it has no money.