

The Address—Mr. Pearson

Mr. Pearson: I would hope that such a meeting would provide us with an opportunity for a free exchange of views on how we see the future of our country and our confederation. While I would not expect such a meeting to go into detailed discussions of constitutional matters—indeed, it would be impossible at any such meeting to do so—I would hope that we could see whether there are likely to be some matters on which there is fundamental agreement among all concerned and which could be made the subject of an early joint effort in the constitutional field.

I have an open mind on this matter but it would seem to me that one of the most important items in the constitutional field with which we could start federally and provincially would be the adoption by all Canadian governments, provincial as well as federal, of a bill of rights for all Canadians, enshrined not only in federal law as it now is but in provincial law. This would be the first statement by all governments in Canada of the basic foundations upon which they want the Canadian society to be established and to grow. It could be argued that such a bill should even precede specific constitutional reforms. Surely, before we can seriously hope to agree on structural changes, we should endeavour to agree, federally and provincially, on a statement of common values and on a declaration of our basic individual and collective rights as Canadians.

This is an area where several provinces and the federal government have made progress during the last few years, and it would seem to me that the centennial year of our confederation might be a good occasion for all the provinces and the federal government to get together and try to define a common statement guaranteeing the basic freedoms and rights of Canadians. I would hope that this could be based on the existing federal bill of rights, which will always be associated with the name of my right hon. friend the Leader of the Opposition.

I have just one or two other matters I should like to mention. I think all members of the house will agree that the government has been trying to advance the idea of more open government, if I may call it that, at the federal level, based on broader parliamentary discussion through committees. Of course we have set up more and more committees during the last few years and the more we set up the more difficult it makes it for hon. members to acquire that educational benefit which my right hon. friend suggested should be available to all members.

We have shown a willingness as a government to submit policy proposals to parliament for real and meaningful discussion and for revision when the government is convinced that revision is needed. We have taken this approach on a number of legislative proposals, notably the transportation and immigration measures.

We want to make parliament a more efficient place so far as decision making is concerned, and a committee for that purpose was set up during our first day of meeting. We also want to give parliament a chance to become a more effective forum for debating and influencing the decisions proposed by government.

Governments can more effectively discharge their responsibilities to the public if they can have more freedom to bring forward ideas and suggestions for discussion first and then be able to make necessary changes in the light of such discussion in parliament without being accused of weakness or retreat. At the same time the government must be able to stand firm on what it believes to be a right course without being accused of obstinacy or without debate being prolonged to inordinate lengths in order to force a change.

Today's media of communication have completely altered the possibility of democratic debate on public issues. My right hon. friend referred to this aspect very impressively a few moments ago when he was talking about broadcasting. In a sense the swiftness and comprehensiveness of our communications make it possible to conduct political debate on a nation-wide basis as it used to be conducted at the town meetings of our distant past. Issues can very quickly be made the focus of a nation-wide debate through today's communications media, but the issues are far more complicated than they used to be. The public can very rapidly be informed of the pros and cons and can make its weight felt on one side or the other almost overnight. This provides a new element of protection for the public interest in open and thorough airing of public issues, provided the public is honestly, objectively and adequately informed.

I believe this necessity of public exposure to issues must soon be given greater recognition in the procedures of parliament. I would like to join with the right hon. Leader of the Opposition in expressing the hope that during this session some experimentation in regard to televising our procedures might be attempted, beginning perhaps with committee