

Mr. Speaker, four words uttered at the very beginning of this debate go to the root of this government's intentions, and go to the root of the Canadian federation as we know it. They typify this government's attitude toward the traditions, the conventions, the very idea of what Canada is all about—four words, uttered in a moment of considerable emotion, and in impeccable English by the lead-off speaker for the government, the Hon. Minister of Justice (Mr. Chrétien). He said "We will change Canada." The emphasis, Mr. Speaker, is on the word "change".

Now, contrary to what those on the government side and our friends on the left might think, the word "change" is not a call to arms to members of my party. I am definitely not one who is in favour of change for the sake of change. Speaking personally, as a progressive kind of Conservative, I welcome change which will truly benefit Canadian society; change which comes about, for example, in response to a social need, through reasoned debate and discussion, change which conserves the best of experience and traditions of the past, as one charts a course for the future. That is the kind of change in which I believe. But as an average Canadian citizen, I cannot help feeling that the present British North America Act has served this country pretty well during the past 113 years.

I know there is a restlessness, among the young people particularly, and in certain areas and regions of this country, about renewing and Canadianizing our constitution. That is an important feeling that must be addressed in any constitutional change. But it is Quebec that wants change most urgently.

All of this can be, and should be, understood by the rest of the country, and by those people who do not see the need for that kind of change—particularly since we have grown of age and no longer need to have our constitution controlled and amended by a foreign country. I can understand most Canadians sympathizing with that point of view.

What I very much resent, and I am speaking quite personally now, as a Canadian and as an individual member of Parliament, not necessarily speaking on behalf of my party, is the unseemly haste, the unnecessary tinkering and tampering with a constitution which is not only the foundation of 113 years of this country's lifetime, but a constitution which our Fathers of Confederation built upon the precedents and traditions of several hundred years of the British parliamentary democratic system. That system, as Winston Churchill once put it, may not be the best system in the world, but it surely beats whatever takes second place.

Clearly, Mr. Speaker, this is a deviously dangerous document. No matter how often we on the opposition side try to point out how profoundly we disagree with certain segments of the Prime Minister's proposed new constitution, members on the government side and members of the media choose to interpret this opposition in totality, if I may use a famous word. They disregard some of our very real concerns about the dangerous aspects of this document and choose to interpret any adverse comment about the Prime Minister's image of the future of our country as, possibly, anti-patriation. Let me make clear on behalf of my party, for myself, and to anybody

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who is listening out there, that we favour patriation of the British North America Act. We favour Canadian control over a Canadian constitution. It is high time that we move now, as we should have moved ten or 15 or 20 years ago. Nobody will disagree with that basic principle. But one cannot rush into this kind of thing by a December 9 deadline.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to George Washington, "Delay is preferable to error". I am not suggesting another 53 years' delay, but we do not have to do it by December 9. As I have said, this proposed new constitution is violating a fundamental principle on which this country was built. Whenever you violate a principle, you get a short-term gain but a long-term loss.

The Prime Minister stated at the close of the First Ministers' Conference on the constitution that he sees two concepts of Canada. He saw two irreconcilable versions of this country expressed at the conference. One view, held by some of the provincial premiers, the Prime Minister said, was that Canada is an association of provinces, and that his own view was that Canada "is more than the sum of its parts". The Prime Minister said:

There is a national interest which transcends regional interests. In a conflict between national and provincial interests, the national interest must prevail.

I found that very interesting. It might interest hon. members to hear the Prime Minister's words from his book, "Federalism and the French Canadian", published in 1968; I quote from page 191 as follows:

Federalism is by its very essence a compromise and a pact . . . It is a pact or quasi treaty in the sense that the terms of that compromise cannot be changed unilaterally.

I emphasize the last five words—"compromise cannot be changed unilaterally". These are the Prime Minister's own words, his own writings. The Prime Minister once again chooses to ignore his own advice. Mr. Speaker, I am a strong believer in the principle of a federal government's role: Ottawa must act in the national interest when some premiers are acting as czars in their own regions. But the Prime Minister and I really part company when it comes to how strong the central government should be when conflicts arise.

The Canada I believe in is definitely not the Canada that this present Prime Minister is trying to mold in his own image through constitutional reform. Next time you see a picture of the original Fathers of Confederation, count them: 37 men came to a consensus and created a confederation nearly a century and a quarter ago. Canada then, as now, was in fact and still is a sum of its parts. Of course, then, as now, a strong leadership role was needed in Ottawa. But the federal nature of this country was respected, and it was practised with distinction under 15 prime ministers of Canada until the right hon. member for Mount Royal came along.

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The Canada I believe in, and in which I have travelled extensively, really amounts to at least five, six, and I feel maybe seven different countries, or regions, each with its own geographical and sociopolitical point of view: Atlantic Canada,