

Federal-Provincial Relations

and then as a sort of an afterthought are presented to parliament.

Time and time again we find that decisions which have been arrived at months or even years previously finally come before us in suggested legislation and are presented to this house for approval. In my opinion this is not the basic responsibility of the people's representatives. Surely then, we need to take a long, hard look at how we can restructure our relations and responsibilities both federally and provincially.

I think we should not fear change simply because its new and should not promote it simply because it is novel. Rather we should realize that much of the structures of government that were laid down almost 100 years ago now were laid down for an almost entirely different kind of world. The provinces did not then have nearly the kind of responsibilities which they have today, because in those days we were not able to communicate by word of mouth or be transported from one place to another in the way that is possible today. We are in a new age and we must not be hamstrung by decisions made by legislators in this house almost 100 years ago.

I think we must act, and act soon, or we shall make a mockery of the institution that we call parliament. I believe this very strongly, Mr. Speaker, because coming from a province in which in many ways we are still deprived of the rightful benefits that belong to a Canadian citizen, it is important to me that we face this question.

Mr. J. B. Stewart (Antigonish-Guysborough): Mr. Speaker, the motion before the house is couched in terms that would lead one to expect a little different type of debate. I shall turn later to the motion before the house, for I think there is much in it that deserves some direct comment. Before doing that I wish to make some remarks in the vein of the debate up to this moment.

There has been a strong tendency of thought in some quarters to commend a unitary system of government while federalism is derided. The confusions and difficulties of federalism are called frequently to our attention.

I was very interested to listen to the concise and succinct remarks of the hon. member for Prince (Mr. MacDonald). I could not help thinking as he spoke that he comes from the one province in Canada which above all others should rejoice in our federal system and in the fact that we did not over the years

become more and more unitary in our constitution. I suggest to you, sir, that if over the years our constitution had become more and more unitary we would have had an increasing concentration of economic wealth and political power in Quebec and Ontario. It has been federalism which has permitted the extremities of the country to some extent to counteract this pull toward the centre.

When I think of the Premier of Prince Edward Island coming as one of the 11 heads at a federal-provincial conference I can see the advantages to that province of the federal-provincial conference. Despite the small population of Prince Edward Island, the premier of that province is one among eleven. Of course, Mr. Speaker, the same is true of the premier of my own province. Those of us who come from the smaller provinces ought not to be too scornful of the institution of the federal-provincial conference. We ought not to yearn too much for the fleshpots of a unitary system of government.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I wish to turn to the motion before us. It proposes the establishment of a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons to consider all reports dealing with federal-provincial matters in which this parliament is interested. In other words, this joint committee is in a sense to prepare a report on reports. We are to be second-guessing the commissions established by the Governor General in Council. We are to prepare a more refined, a more sublime, a more elevated report; a report not to the Governor General in Council but, instead, to the two houses of parliament.

I do not think this would be a desirable undertaking. When a commission is established its membership is selected, presumably, on the basis of expertise and knowledge. The commissioners are supposed to know a great deal about one particular subject, finance, let us say, biculturalism, or some other topic. I do not see how we politicians, amateurs, can undertake to prepare a more refined report on their reports.

The second criticism I have of the motion is that we, by adopting it, would be establishing a kind of parliamentary study group. I assume that all members of the other place and this house read the reports prepared by the experts and examine them diligently. But why should we want to do additional and more recondite research? Under the motion