

*The Address—Mr. Penner*

Speech from the Throne because I think it is important to all Canadians:

The Commonwealth is central to Canada's efforts to promote, through concerted international action, a process of political dialogue in South Africa aimed at establishing representative government.

It is, I think, almost impossible for reasonable men and women to understand how one could make any sort of a justifiable argument for preventing a majority of the people in a given nation-state from having their say at the ballot box and from being represented in a free Parliament.

Returning to Ottawa after attending this very exhilarating and useful conference, I examined for myself and read very carefully the Speech from the Throne. As Hon. Members might expect, I looked particularly for pertinent references dealing with such questions as aboriginal rights, a new comprehensive native claims policy, Indian self-government and constitutional and political development in northern Canada.

I recognize as do all Hon. Members that not every single thing can be mentioned in a Speech from the Throne. Simply because something is omitted does not necessarily mean that there will be an absence of action. Nevertheless, I think the one single reference to aboriginal rights and the upcoming First Ministers' Conference on that subject scheduled for the spring of 1987 did seem to me to be just a little on the slim side for such a major issue in Canadian public policy.

I have to say that the one reference to aboriginal rights that was made in the Speech from the Throne was undoubtedly an important reference. There is no question about that at all. However, unless I am guilty of a misinterpretation, its phrasing seemed to me to carry with it a certain weariness and a certain frustration with the process of defining and entrenching aboriginal rights in the Constitution of Canada.

The Speech from the Throne mentioned that the question of aboriginal rights is still on the constitutional agenda. It then went on to say that the federal Government will exert every possible effort to bring these discussions to a successful conclusion, but there are the provinces with which to contend. The Speech from the Throne seems to imply that this reality will make life very difficult, indeed.

I have the distinct impression that with respect to its commitment to Indian self-government, to aboriginal rights and to the settlement of native claims, the Government is moving down market. I do hope I am wrong. If I am, I will be the first to admit it and to rejoice in the fact that I am wrong, but I do feel that these issues are sliding down on the scale of national priorities.

The Leader of the Government in the other place has said that we must plan for success, but he made repeated references to the cost of the effects of failure. My fear is that there is a mind-set developing toward the inevitable failure of this next crucial First Ministers' Conference scheduled for the spring of next year.

When I read what was written in the Speech from the Throne, I contrasted that with the election promise made by the Government in 1984. At that time, government Members said that they were going to continue to search for an accord on self-government issues. I found that promise to be strong and unequivocal. Even the Throne Speech of 1984 was stronger in its language. It talked about the need to honour the commitment to Canada's aboriginal peoples contained in the Constitution Act of 1982, and said that for these people, as for all Canadians, the high expectations that attended the act of patriation must not be disappointed. There is a continuing search; high expectations must not be disappointed. Those were things said in the past. The current Speech from the Throne indicates that the question is still on the agenda. There seems to be a kind of weariness about it all. Although some politicians, officials, or Premiers of the provinces may be weary with the topic, it will not go away. It is either this Government or its successor which will have to face up to the reality that there must be a resolution. The resolution must be just, be historically based, and satisfy the expectations which are abounding in the country.

● (1450)

I have not been in the House of Commons all that long, but the issue of Indian self-government and aboriginal rights, in the time you, Sir, and I have been Members of the House of Commons, has moved from a position where it was regarded as being something radical and remote, to a position where it was considered to be ridiculous for a while, and now to a position where it is relevant and a reality.

I should like to spend a few minutes talking about high expectations. Exactly what are the high expectations of Canada's indigenous people? For what will they be looking at the First Ministers Conference which we believe is scheduled for sometime during the month of April, 1987? Let us be very clear. They are looking for an acknowledgement, a right which they believe to be an inherent and unsundered right. They are looking to have that right recognized and protected in the Constitution of Canada. There is a very big difference—and it should not escape any of us—between having a right protected and recognized in the Constitution and merely enshrining a principle. I am not opposed to enshrining principles, but if we want reality to flow from constitutional amendment, it must be more than the enshrining of a principle; it must be the recognition and protection of a right which, I repeat, was never surrendered and is inherent.

Beyond that, the discussions at the First Ministers' Conference in the spring of next year must be serious, practical, and detailed in certain specific respects. For example, we cannot any longer avoid facing up to the necessity of an expanded land base for the indigenous people of Canada. I do not want to spend time giving a history lesson to the House of Commons, but it is terribly incongruous that the original inhabitants of the land, those who occupied and used the land in the north, west, east and centre, constitute only 2 per cent of Canada's population today. That 2 per cent of the population has a