

NATIVE AFFAIRS

OKA CRISIS—ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY—GOVERNMENT POSITION

Hon. Len Marchand: Honourable senators, I do not want to stray too far from questions raised by Senator Perrault, but last summer was rather long and hot for a number of us, especially those of us in the Indian community. The Oka crisis was on the minds of many Canadians and in our province of British Columbia there were many roadblocks formed by our people in sympathy with what happened at Oka.

If I recall correctly, in his speech in the Commons on September 25 the Prime Minister referred to a royal commission of inquiry. I heard him talk about a royal commission in other interviews, as well as a commission of inquiry into what happened at Oka. Personally, I support both.

There must be an inquiry into what went on at Oka specifically, and, in order to deal with the overall question, there should be a royal commission of inquiry, something which is supported by many people in our community, and by people like Max Yalden and others who have been talking about it for some years.

Where do these matters stand? Is there the possibility of an inquiry into Oka and is the idea of a royal commission still being considered by the government? Will there be an announcement about a royal commission of inquiry into the whole question of Aboriginal interests in the country?

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government and Minister of State for Federal-Provincial Relations): With regard to Oka, I will have to inquire into the situation and the circumstances that led up to it. I will have to inform myself as to the state of play in that matter.

With regard to a royal commission into aboriginal matters generally, we could not exclude that possibility at all. For the moment, we want to give the Citizens' Forum an opportunity to get up and running.

My friend will know that, in the terms of reference, the first area of inquiry listed is the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canadian society. That is for a very good reason.

● (1640)

There is no question more important or urgent, and none with more history, on which the Citizens' Forum must hold a proper dialogue among Canadians. Consensus is lacking. We want to give the Citizens' Forum an opportunity to make some headway. However, I do not exclude at all the possibility of appointing a royal commission into Aboriginal matters generally. The only thing that is on hold is an actual constitutional amendment, for reasons that the honourable senators and others understand.

Senator Marchand: Honourable senators, I am sure the Leader of the Government can understand the position taken by some leaders of the Assembly of First Nations when they say they are not too excited about this latest citizens' group which has been appointed. There have been full-fledged consti-

tutional conferences from which nothing has really come. We had the Meech Lake Accord and the fiasco that developed there.

They are really saying, I guess, that they are not very excited about again making their positions known in front of this inquiry. I am hoping it will be resolved before too long but I am sure you can understand why they are saying that. The constitutional positions they have put forward have been really clear. They have been consistent in putting forward the amendments they wanted in the Constitution.

A royal commission is a whole different ball game. It relates to a lot of other issues. The AFN has put forward some positions saying that perhaps only economic and social issues should be looked into. Other groups say other things. Personally, I favour a full-fledged royal commission of inquiry that covers the whole field. Nothing should be left out.

I would hope that the result of such a commission would be a whole new beginning, a whole new approach, a whole new leaf turned in the life of our people and their relationship with each other, the government and other Canadians. That is how I see a royal commission of inquiry. It should be that complete and comprehensive.

As well, I was rather hopeful that the standing committee concerned in the other place would have started its inquiry according to the agreement made over there. I welcomed it. I thought it was a good opportunity. I think it is most important that we not wait too long before a complete public record of what went on at Oka is established. If the other place is not going to do it, then I hope the Leader of the Government might support the idea that our Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples do that work. We have the talent in this place. We have the commitment. We have the machinery. We can do the job.

I want to impress upon the Leader of the Government most strongly that it is absolutely urgent and important that we have a public record of what went on last summer at Oka.

Senator Murray: Again, honourable senators, I will make inquiries among my colleagues in the other place as to the state of play of that matter.

With regard to the other matters raised, the honourable senator correctly points out that the constitutional positions and aspirations of the Aboriginal peoples are well known, at least to governments. There is, however, as Mr. Spicer said the other night on the program to which Senator Perrault referred, enormous ignorance in the country about many more fundamental matters touching the Aboriginal peoples. Constitutional conferences failed. I attended some of them. It is easy to say that they failed for lack of political leadership, but at the end of the day it has to be recognized that they also failed because there is not a consensus in this country as to how these matters should be dealt with. I would hope that the Aboriginal peoples themselves, as well as their leaders, would look upon the Citizens' Forum as a real opportunity to overcome the depths of ignorance that still exists in this country on some of those issues.