

Constitution Amendment, 1987

Some people have objected to the statement in the Accord that there will be annual First Ministers' meetings. Some people have even suggested that this would work against the federal power. I think this is absolute nonsense. We already have First Ministers' meetings. They are part of our normal governmental life, and they are healthy things to have. We have a shared-responsibility Constitution. Some programs are federal, some are provincial, some are shared. It is normal, natural and healthy for the Governments to get together at least annually to discuss matters of mutual concern to Canada.

The question of power over immigration has been raised as being a diminution of federal power and also a matter which could impinge on women's equality. I do not think either are true. We have already had arrangements with the Province of Quebec for 16 years now and we have not seen inordinate discrimination. There is discrimination against women in immigration, but it is not in any particular province. There is national discrimination.

The safeguards in the case of immigration are quite clear. The Charter still holds. That is made perfectly clear in the Accord and it is made perfectly clear that the agreement arranged with the province must be approved by Parliament, by us, elected representatives, and we certainly would not approve of a discriminatory arrangement. The terms, objectives and nature of immigration policy remain federal. I think that is not an area which will pose new problems, and let us hope that it will provide some new solutions. We want immigration to be handled in a way that is satisfactory to provinces, and it will work much more smoothly if that is the case.

It has been suggested that giving the power to the provinces to nominate Senators, although I hope we do not have a Senate much longer, and judges for the Supreme Court of Canada is a diminution of federal responsibility. Again I do not think this is true. It does not give the power to a province to put someone in the Senate or the Supreme Court of Canada to work against Canada. That simply is not possible. The appointment must have the final approval of the federal Government through the Governor in Council. It means that the provinces will propose people for nomination, and that is perfectly reasonable. This is done in other federal states. If the federal Government does not consider those nominees acceptable, then they will negotiate. Negotiation, talking to each other, reconciling differences is a normal and proper part of life in a federal state.

[*Translation*]

We must rely on the common sense of Canadians, of the federal and provincial governments, in order to find a solution to these differences.

I am an ecologist and I want adequate federal power to enact regulations in the area of environment. Toxic substances flowing in our rivers and polluting our air, as in acid rains, do not recognize provincial boundaries. Therefore, there must be strict national criteria. I believe the provinces should have the right to demand even stricter criteria but not to lower the established national criteria. Ecologists from Quebec agree on that. Ecologists from all parts of Canada are asking for such

measures. Yet, both levels of government share the responsibility for environment. Agreements must be negotiated in order to establish adequate criteria. The Accord does not bring any change in this regard. The federal Government is not any more capable nor any less capable to act in this area. Political will is required at both levels of Government in order to bring about a real remedy and this goodwill cannot be legislated. However, I suggest the agreements that are required will become more likely with Quebec's adhesion to the Constitution. The energy that was wasted in bitterness and confusion will be better used if Quebec becomes part of the Constitution.

[*English*]

That, Madam Speaker, is what I am looking forward to. We have to put our past behind us. We have to put behind us those years of confrontation and bitterness. I want further to see many more Canadians involved in the process of constitutional development. The Constitution belongs to all Canadians. It is not government property. Average Canadians should be involved in the next steps as we work toward a fairer Constitution, redressing the injustices to the North and our native peoples, and dealing with the alienation of the west and the east and their proposals for constitutional change to meet their concerns.

● (1210)

I have carefully examined the objections which have been raised. I have studied the committee's work on the subject. The committee worked hard all summer on this issue. It weighed the objections raised against the consequences of not acting. I think we must consider those objections very carefully as well as amendments, but we must also consider the consequences of refusing reconciliation with Quebec. That would be a terrible non-step to take, a terrible dereliction of our duty.

I believe that by saying yes to Quebec we will also be saying yes to all of Canada and our future together. Let this Parliament and the provincial legislatures make this commitment now so that we can work together creatively, responsibly, and amicably to build the kind of Canada that all Canadians want.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Champagne): Questions and comments. Resuming debate. The Hon. Member for Saint-Henri—Westmount (Mr. Johnston).

Hon. Donald J. Johnston (Saint-Henri—Westmount): Madam Speaker, I would like to use the time available to me today to speak, first of all, to my colleagues, friends, constituents and fellow citizens in the Province of Quebec. Madam Speaker, as you know, there are supporters of the Constitutional Accord who insist that to be against or to reject the Accord is to be against Quebec; that to reject the concept of Quebec as a distinct society is to be against Quebec itself; that not to accept the Constitutional Accord unamended, despite its flagrant shortcomings, means not accepting Quebec as a member of our constitutional family. That, Madam Speaker, is tantamount to blackmail. However, there are many people who have let themselves be convinced by these simplistic and unsound arguments.