

Constitution Acts

Prior to the election of this Government, the government leaders of the territories were not invited to attend First Ministers conferences other than those dealing with the Constitution and aboriginal rights. The Prime Minister took the initiative in November, 1984, of writing to the Premiers to seek their views on possible territorial involvement in the First Ministers Conference held in February of 1985.

As a result of that important initiative, it was ultimately agreed that the government leaders of the territories should be invited as "official observers" to the conference. Furthermore, the Prime Minister invited both of them to come to the table to make short statements. Finally, the territorial Governments were both allowed to use the services of the Canadian Inter-governmental Conference Secretariat. These arrangements have been repeated at all the annual First Ministers Conferences since then, and they go far beyond what is provided for "simple observers".

I am proud, Mr. Speaker, of the role that this Government has played in providing for territorial involvement at public First Ministers conferences and, in particular, of the leadership role of the Prime Minister.

The arrangements I have described concerning the involvement of territorial government leaders at the First Ministers Conferences on the economy are a further example of this Government's commitment to undertaking practical steps to allow territorial Governments to pursue the practical needs and concerns of northern Canadians.

Ms. Margaret Mitchell (Vancouver East): Mr. Speaker, I am very honoured to stand as a second speaker for my Party today. I would like to start by commending the Hon. Member for the Yukon (Ms. McLaughlin) for not only bringing this Bill forward but for her outstanding role in a very short few months as representative of the Yukon Territory. I think that since I have been in this House, which is now nine long years, almost 10, it is the first year when we have had a very strong voice from the territories. She has been up on many different issues, but none more important than the issue that she raises today, of constitutional representation and representation of the Yukon and the Northwest territorial leaders at the table of the leaders of this land.

I must say, first of all, that I think it was just over three years ago that I attended the First Ministers Conference which was held in Vancouver, as an observer. It is rather ironic that the main topic of the sessions that I attended was equality.

I looked at the table and I was astounded to see that the leaders from the territories were not sitting there. I spoke to Mr. Penikett, as my hon. friend from the Liberal Party said, "the outstanding leader from the Yukon Government". He said that is true, we are still colonials, we are still treated as colonials. It is appalling, really, and I do not think that many southern Canadians really stop to think about this, that we are treating one-third of our territory and the people there who

have the longest tradition—thousands and thousands of years—as second-class citizens.

I think also that the kind of situation that we have at First Ministers' meetings where offers are made that the Prime Minister would speak to the territorial leaders and then convey their wishes to the other leaders, if he thought it was important, is a sheer parochial form of government and it is quite insulting, I am sure, to northerners.

Now, we know that the northern territorial leaders have asked to be included, with full voice, at the meetings of the First Ministers. When the First Ministers met in 1987 to decide our constitutional amendments, both territorial government leaders came to Ottawa and they asked to participate. Then they asked that if they were not allowed to participate, could they at least be assured that they would be consulted by the Prime Minister before any amendment was finalized. It is appalling that they were denied both these requests. They had no consultation, no representation and they were allowed no vote at this First Ministers' Table, the most important meeting in our land and perhaps in our history.

The Leader of the Yukon Government made a number of very important remarks at that meeting. My friend from the Liberal Party has mentioned some of them, but I would like to mention a couple of others.

He stated, "On June 1, 11 men in a locked room decided to consign the occupants of one-third of the land mass of Canada to a constitutional limbo". As a matter of fact, I think he said this after a special joint committee meeting. He went on to say, "Except in a manner that would credit Franz Kafka, there was no trial. The condemned had no hearing. There was no evidence, no prosecution, no defence that we know of, but the jury became judges and sentenced generations of northerners to perpetual colonial status".

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He said later that even if unanimity were possible, how could one justify allowing the representatives of everyone else in the nation except those most affected to decide the North's place in Confederation? Surely this is the very opposite of self-determination. Surely this is a rule fit for an exclusive gentlemen's club, not a democratic society. We would certainly agree that it was a gentlemen's club, and this kind of decision-making was certainly highly undemocratic.

Both opposition Parties and most government Members as well felt that the territories needed some redress and that we should have amended the Meech Lake Accord. Certainly our Party pressed very strongly for an amendment that would have allowed the former amending formula to be used in any future meetings concerned with the inclusion of the territories as future provinces. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney), despite having some sympathy for this, did not