

Interim Supply

we approach what will perhaps be one of the more important debates in the history of the House of Commons, certainly one of the more important since I became a member of the house six years ago.

My remarks at this time will in no way be irresponsible because, together with other people, I have done my very best to examine the general outline and details of the constitutional amendment procedures. I am not going to say now that these provisions alone constitute the seed from which an associate state can very well grow. However, the approach of the present government to this matter, together with other things that are going on in Canada at the present time, lead many responsible Canadians and members of the House of Commons to believe that, wittingly or unwittingly, the actions of the present government are sowing the seed of the possibility of an associate state coming about.

Just a few days ago I read that a minister of the province of Quebec, Mr. Kierans, had travelled overseas and had listed a number of departments now administered by the federal government which he said Quebec did not need any more because they were superfluous. This speech has gone unanswered. I know he spoke in what he thought was a responsible way but the fact is that his remarks have gone unanswered. There is also the fact that we are soon to be confronted with the constitutional amendment procedures that the government has in mind, and while I do not make any accusations at the present time there is a rumour which many people firmly believe that Mr. Lesage wants a consulate established in Paris. Then we can also add the fact that in regard to federal-provincial relations the Prime Minister is not leading the federal cause but is negotiating it. He was good at that sort of thing for many years, but once you become Prime Minister it is your obligation at all times, no matter what the situation is with regard to federal-provincial relations, to outline the federal case, to lead the federal cause and not to negotiate the federal government out of the capacity to govern at all.

Quite frankly, sir, a year ago I did not think it was possible that as a member of the house I would be speaking in this tenor at all because I remember getting up time and time again and asking the Prime minister and other ministers, including the Minister of National Health and Welfare who is in her seat now, whether they had consulted

[Mr. Graftey.]

with the provinces. A year ago federal-provincial relations were in a terrible state because this was before the present government had coined the idea of co-operative federalism. A year ago federal-provincial relations and, in fact, the whole domestic economic program of the government were floundering because the government had failed to consult the provinces, especially in matters of conjoint jurisdiction.

I feel that as a responsible opposition we did a good job in bringing this situation to the attention of the government on many occasions, and as a Conservative I must recognize that, everything else being equal, I believe strongly in local autonomy. This is a part of Conservative principles. We believe that very often people at the local level know what is best for them and how best they should govern their affairs. I believe in this kind of decentralization. But, Mr. Chairman, in the old world and in the new it has been a consistent principle of Conservatives to fight extremes wherever we find them.

Last year we fought the extreme of an unwitting centralization superimposed upon the provinces by a cabinet largely made up of ex-senior bureaucrats who did not understand the real meaning of co-operative federalism. It is unbelievable to me that in less than a year this same government has unwittingly gone from one extreme of the swing of the pendulum to the other. So I believe it is now one of the challenges facing the opposition to save confederation, to save the federal government, just as it was a challenge to Macdonald, Cartier and the Conservative party almost 100 years ago to forge the bonds of confederation in the first place.

Mr. Gelber: Will the hon. member permit a question?

Mr. Graftey: Yes.

Mr. Gelber: I find it difficult to recognize the description of the hon. member for Queens, the hon. member for Peace River and the hon. member now speaking of the present trend in federal-provincial relations. Would he tell us whether federal powers have been eroded over the last 30 years or are we merely adjusting from the centralization resulting from the war? Has there been an erosion of power in the last 30 years?

Mr. Graftey: That is a very good question and I hope to answer it in a general and perhaps in a detailed way as I proceed with my speech.