

Constitution Amendment, 1987

of pressure on free trade, and perhaps it is thrown a bit off balance.

However, I did appreciate receiving a call at approximately 10.30 this morning to advise that the Government had decided to change the order, which gave us three-quarters of an hour to attempt to make the necessary arrangements. It was a little tight, but I appreciate the notice. I checked with the Government Deputy House Leader and he indicated that the Government did have a speaker to begin, the Hon. Member for Western Arctic (Mr. Nickerson). In that manner we will be able to get underway, and by that time we will have our speakers in place.

It is a fluid, dynamic situation, but I do wish to say that I appreciate receiving a call from the Deputy House Leader indicating that there had been a change at the last minute.

Mr. Lewis: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments of my colleague, the Whip for the Official Opposition (Mr. Gauthier). I also appreciate his difficulties. But as my colleague, the House Leader for the New Democrats indicated, it is a fluid situation these days. The House has been debating almost concurrently Bill C-55 and the Meech Lake Accord. In fact, there have been informal discussions that we may consider sitting tonight in order to accommodate extra speakers.

• (1120)

I would also say that the Government has been agreeing to a rotation which has allowed as many opposition Members as possible to speak almost on a one, one, one basis, although the numbers in the House would dictate a different speaker rotation basis.

We have been trying to co-operate. I appreciate that this has been a bit of a glitch in everyone's schedule, but we are ready for the Hon. Member for Western Arctic (Mr. Nickerson) to make his speech.

Mr. Speaker: It might be helpful, especially to the public which is listening and watching, if I commented on the intervention of the Hon. Member for Ottawa—Vanier (Mr. Gauthier), which I think was quite appropriate.

As Hon. Members know, sometimes the press reports the fact that during ordinary debate something less than all Members of the House of Commons are in their seats. There is a reason for that. Hon. Members cannot spend all their time in this Chamber during debate. They have innumerable obligations to meet, especially in respect of their own constituents and also especially in respect of the nearly 40 committees which can be sitting at one time or another putting in the work dispatched to them by the Chamber.

The comments of the Hon. Member for Ottawa—Vanier were appropriate. I also appreciate the comments of the Hon. Member for Kamloops—Shuswap (Mr. Riis). In a sense he enforced the comments made earlier by his colleague. I know they have both made efforts to adjust to a change in the schedule here.

However, I think it is especially important that the public understand that a great deal of the work of this place goes on outside the Chamber. It is not always easy to change the commitments of Members suddenly and bring them into the Chamber.

The Hon. Minister of State (Mr. Lewis) in speaking for the Government recognized this, but again it is important for the public to understand that it is the Government's position to set the order each day, as it has done in this case. The Hon. Minister of State has indicated that he would have wished that perhaps more notice could have been given. In any event, that was the decision of Government, and that has always been the way governments run this place.

I think it is very important that the public understand that a great deal of the work which is being done on behalf of the public is not done in this Chamber. It is done in other places and, as a consequence, when there is a change here it puts pressure not only on members of the Opposition but on members on the government side, because it requires a change in plans and a change in schedules. It is important that this is properly recorded and, if I might say so, emphasized from time to time.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Dave Nickerson (Western Arctic): Mr. Speaker, it might be interesting to note that this caught me as much unawares as it did members of the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps unawares but not by surprise.

Mr. Nickerson: When the First Ministers gathered at Meech Lake on April 30, and then again on June 3 at the Langevin Block, they had before them a glorious opportunity to make Canada one, or an opportunity to bring into the Constitution those parts of Canada that had hitherto been without. This opportunity they blew.

They were successful in bringing the Province of Quebec into the Constitution. I do not think anyone could be more appreciative of that or more sympathetic to the wishes of the people of Quebec than the people of northern Canada, because they too were without. They brought in Quebec, but they left out the Northwest Territories and Yukon.

Some 75,000 Canadians would dearly love to be full Canadians the same as anyone else but, because they live north of the 60th parallel, they were excluded completely. Was it necessary not only to injure those 75,000 Canadians but to insult them as well? They said that the circle of Confederation was completed, but 75,000 people were left on the outside, beyond the pale. Meech Lake will be remembered in the North as one of the most shameful events in Canadian history, one from which they were totally excluded, one in which they had no say. It was an event where only representatives of southern Canadians got together in what I have described before as a cozy little club and decided to blackball the people of the North.