

British North America Act

● (1720)

We would repeat this is a compromise. We are not too happy about it and we hope our willingness to compromise here will be reciprocated by other delegations when we advance proposals that are very important to us.

We repeat the position taken by Premier Thatcher at the earlier conferences that there are problems facing our people which have, in our judgment, a far-higher priority than constitutional reform. We will be bringing these problems to the attention of the conference, as we have in the past, and ask for sympathetic understanding and co-operation from the other delegations.

I will not go on to discuss the points raised about transportation policy and regional disparities, the very theme and essence, except considerably broader than that advanced today by the hon. member for Egmont. On that general point, I am sure that if the former premier of Saskatchewan, the late Ross Thatcher, were alive today he would think differently about the position in terms of priorities on the question of patriating our constitution and the revised amending formula and, indeed, a revised constitution. However, that is perhaps neither here nor there with respect to the debate this afternoon.

I suggest we would be confusing and perhaps muddying the waters if we approved this resolution to which its theme and object I certainly subscribe. I do not quarrel with the hon. member's objective. However, to move in this regard alone at this point in time would be a mistake. By the same token, I have no great suggestion as to where and how we should move in that sense. We need to come up with better answers and better approaches. We should move quickly to get our constitution here, finding an amending formula, revising and updating the document so that we can get on with the job of building tomorrow. It certainly concerns all of us.

In his opening remarks, the hon. member referred to the current debate on the fiscal arrangements act. It touches upon the constitution. We have had numerous effective changes and adaptations over the years by virtue of federal-provincial agreements. I am not now speaking of those conferences called to discuss or consider the constitution as such but, rather, the many, almost ongoing airlifts between this capital and the various provincial capitals respecting and affecting government departments and agencies. The results of the various agreements worked out there have a very direct effect on how the country operates. They have resulted in effective changes. We have had enough of that approach. As far as I am concerned, we have had more than enough to effectively modify or change the constitution of this country.

I disagree with the hon. member's remark that we should not reject this motion. We should think of broader things. We should be expanding the hon. member's resolution and getting on with the job of developing the kind of constitution this country needs, aimed at the theme put forward in the hon. member's resolution. Let us join the Prime Minister and the government in this regard. It is only by such a debate and joint endeavour that we can systematically deal with not only the concerns of the hon. member for Egmont but other concerns on vital issues which are at the forefront at this time.

Mr. Andrew Brewin (Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the hon. member for Egmont (Mr. MacDonald) on bring-

[Mr. McIsaac.]

ing forward this resolution. We have all too little discussion in this House on constitutional matters. That is unfortunate. Although it is rather out of fashion to talk about constitutions, the plain truth is that constitutions are the fundamental law which provide the framework within which all of our laws are made and our government is conducted. We have neglected the responsibilities of parliament in this field. Therefore, the hon. member for Egmont has done a good thing in bringing this matter before us.

I have one complaint about one small aspect of this resolution. I could not disagree with the main purport and I do not think very many members of the House could disagree. The hon. member has taken from the provisions of the Victoria charter which were agreed to—either unanimously or, at any rate, substantially—statements to which the federal parliament, the government of Canada and the governments of the provinces are committed. The first reads:

—the promotion of equality of opportunity and well-being for all individuals in Canada—

We should be committed to that. My worry is not whether we state it in general terms often or not, but whether we do the practical things which bring about that equality. The second paragraph reads:

—the assurance, as nearly as possible, that essential public services of reasonable quality are available to all individuals in Canada—

That is something that we ought to be committed to as well. I am glad to reassert that. The last paragraph is somewhat similar; it reads:

—the promotion of economic development to reduce disparities in the social and economic opportunities for all individuals in Canada wherever they may live—

Those three general statements seem to be quite unexceptional. We should try to spend—perhaps it cannot be done in one resolution—a little more time working out and talking about how we are going to make these commitments into real things. For example, all these forms of equality require equalization payments flowing through the federal parliament from the richer parts of the country to those that do not have the equivalent tax power to provide public services of reasonable quality. Without equalization, that will never be done.

I sympathize with and entirely agree with those dealing with our present problems, such as the unity of Canada, who say that we must be flexible in dealing with those problems. That is fair and reasonable. I hope that in approaching the problems of Canada, particularly the problems of federal-provincial relations, we will be flexible.

I want to issue a word of warning. If we are too flexible, allowing ourselves to deprive the federal government of the effective spending part, the effective fiscal arrangements and effective powers to carry out this task of equalization, we will destroy this country. There are many different ways of doing this but we have to be careful that we do not so deprive our central institution, the federal government, of the power which will enable it to do the very things which are talked about here—to promote equality of opportunity, and so on. We have to preserve the power to deal with these things if we are to