

National Centennial Act

Mr. Fisher: That might very well be. It is time we had a revamping of the constitution to meet the objections and ideas which people are putting forward. This could really be a wonderful centennial project. Maybe if it could be focused upon some kind of conference, we would really have a lively year in 1967. But I do not wish to leave this point without telling the hon. member for Lapointe, as far as constitutional changes may be concerned, that if he wants to hammer home the assertion that Quebec has a special status he should start by admitting that the people who live in the other provinces may also have a different conception of what the federal or national government should be, and if there is to be any solution to this it will not only be a case of the hon. member or his friends seeking to establish their point of view or their objectives, because other people will be seeking to establish theirs.

Mr. Gregoire: We do not object to that.

Mr. Fisher: The hon. member says he does not object to this. That is fine. I was under the impression that that is all he has done ever since he arrived in the house.

Mr. Gregoire: No.

Mr. Fisher: I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me to stray so far from the matter before us. I can only reflect that your predecessor in the chair perhaps allowed us to stray too far from the terms of the resolution, and that none of us were zealous enough to try to get the speakers back on the subject.

Mr. Gregoire: May I ask a question? The hon. member for Port Arthur said he and his friends have to stay put and shut up while we alone were talking on these subjects. What does he think about his own declaration that the province of Quebec should change its system of education? Does he think that this is the business of the members from other provinces?

Mr. Fisher: This is certainly irrelevant to the matter now under discussion, but all I was doing the other day was saying that the brief showed that Quebec has problems in connection with its educational system, particularly with regard to the retention rate in schools. I should like to say to the hon. member that I do not divide my loyalties. I am not a citizen of Ontario at one moment and a Canadian at another. I happen to think that opportunities for young people in Quebec are just as important to me as opportunities for young people in Ontario. I even think that the trees and the rocks and the iron ore of Quebec belong to me just as the resources of the province of Ontario belong to the people of Quebec.

This somewhat emotional answer is the only answer one can give to a question such as the hon. member asked.

An hon. Member: You are wrong.

The Deputy Chairman: I have allowed the hon. member to ask the question and I have also allowed the hon. member for Port Arthur to answer it. But I do feel we are ranging far and wide from the resolution which is now before the committee.

Mr. Lamontagne: I certainly do not intend to discuss the whole range of the subjects considered yesterday and today in this committee. I think many of these matters might best be discussed when the estimates of the centennial administration are before us.

When I spoke yesterday on this resolution I made a brief statement on what I thought were the nature and significance of the very simple amendments we proposed to the act. I assumed that members had already read the two versions of the present act and that they had also read and carefully studied the exchange of correspondence which was tabled in the house at the end of June.

However, the Leader of the Opposition chose to extend the scope of the debate far beyond the limited field of this resolution and in doing so he made several assertions which cannot go unchallenged. In the first place, he referred to the composition of the national conference on the centenary, which was made public at the beginning of October.

I want to remind hon. members that the act authorizing the creation of that conference was assented to on September 29, 1961. During the year and a half from September, 1961 to April, 1963, the previous government did not take any steps to set up the conference or to appoint its members. One year and a half of precious time was lost as a result of the indecision and confusion of the former government. It is true that appointments had been made in January, 1963, to the national centennial administration. However when we took office in April, there was practically no staff there, so the administration itself could not properly operate. Finally, the national committee of ministers had not met since the fall of 1961. This is the situation as it was back in April. This is an indication of how seriously the previous government approached the preparations for the centennial of confederation: An act had been passed by parliament, but practically nothing had been done to implement that act a year and a half later.

Now, I come to the composition of the national conference itself. Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition said that in appointing the members greater consideration had been given to political fitness and