

The Constitution

Time does not permit me to deal with some of the other aspects of this matter that I should like to deal with, so I shall sum up by saying that this constitutional package is enormous but necessary at this time. As Canada enters the eighties with a new made-in-Canada Constitution for the century ahead, it is clear that creating a Constitution is a painful, agonizing experience, as the Fathers of Confederation found out. In some ways, what we are going through now is not unlike the process we went through in getting our Canadian flag and our national anthem. But who would want to take them away today?

We need to patriate the British North America Act, our present Constitution. We need a charter of rights and freedoms and an amending formula, and we need them now.

Mr. Albert Cooper (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I rise today with somewhat mixed feelings. There is always pleasure in participating in a historic debate, yet for me there is a certain amount of sadness in this participation. The pleasure comes from taking part in a golden opportunity that has been presented where we can finally do something about our Constitution and where the first concrete steps toward constitutional reform can be taken.

There is still a certain amount of sadness, however, in that this golden opportunity has been seized by the government and used to achieve its political ambitions, its nearsighted visions of constitutional reform. This seizure is dangerous because the blatant attempts of the government in this direction have tended to destroy the principle upon which this country is based, that being the spirit of co-operation and consensus which is essentially known by all of us to be the federalist nature of Canada. It cannot be denied that the fundamental nature of Canada rests on the philosophy of federalism. As a government of a federation I think we should understand that the steps to good constitutional reform are, first of all, the steps of co-operation, steps of agreement, and steps of consensus. All of those are steps of unity.

Then we must ask how those steps can be taken, Mr. Speaker. I think this is fairly simple. We begin with simple patriation, followed by entrenchment of an equalization formula and an agreed upon amending formula. So we have a solution which is ludicrously simple; in fact, it is so simple that it has escaped the discerning eyes of hon. members opposite and of many, but not all, members to my left.

I believe that it is in fact possible to get agreement, not necessarily unanimity but certainly consensus, on a number of matters, such as patriation, on which we already have agreement; on equalization, which we know we have agreement for; and on an amending formula, on which we have already had substantial agreement. This would be acceptable. It would be the logical federalist approach and it would certainly be in keeping with the federalist spirit of Canada.

The government does not appear to want to maintain that federal spirit, however. It said as much on October 22, 1980, when the government and the NDP newlyweds voted against a Conservative motion which called for immediate patriation with an amending formula. That motion met with a degree of

consensus and had it been given approval the Constitution would have been brought home. It would have been amended in Canada by Canadians and would have been the greatest exercise in unity in history.

That is what the majority of Canadians support. That is what the provinces support and that is certainly what the Conservative Party supports. Unfortunately, it is not what the Liberals and the NDP support. They want what the majority of Canadians do not want. In fact, recent polls indicate that 60 to 65 per cent of the Canadian population do not want unilateral action and that 80 per cent of the provinces do not want it either.

Hon. members opposite probably wonder why almost the entire nation is opposed to unilateral action. In order to attempt to answer this question I should like to ask one more question, one that is essential and with which all of us must come to grips. That question simply is: What is Canada? It is a simple question but at the same time a very difficult one. It is difficult in that we would probably receive as many different answers as we have different people.

● (1420)

For me, to describe what Canada is I have to think in terms of people and friends. For example, a friend who is a farmer in the Peace country; another friend, a banker who lives at the other end of the country in Prince Edward Island. Then I think of a friend who is a pipefitter living in Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories, and finally of a friend who lives in Vancouver and is a carpenter. Those people coming from wide regions, miles and miles apart, are Canadians and are essentially what Canada is. If I were to ask each of them what they thought of Canada, their answers would be different. Their answers would be very different because they come from different provinces and different regions. They have different lifestyles. They come from different economic strata having different desires and different goals. They have different conceptions of Canada.

Yet if we were to put them all together in one room, a very solid concise common denominator would exist. A togetherness, a camaraderie, would exist between them. It exists because they are all citizens of probably one of the most unique nations on earth. A togetherness exists even though people live thousands of miles apart. They know they live in a country traditionally willing to pull together, to co-operate and to help those in need, whether they live a thousand miles away or next door. They live in a country where consensus has been and is a way of life. It has made it possible for these friends of mine, the banker, the farmer, the pipefitter and the carpenter, to pull together, even though they may well be pulling for somewhat different goals and dreams.

It is this consensus and co-operation which allows those differences to be a unifying force, not a divisive force. The miracle of our federation is that differences can in fact be a unifying force. But what makes us a federation? It is very simply the fact that we have sovereign, democratically elected governments on two levels, provincial and federal.