

Mr. Clark: We would also—I reiterate this point because it should be a matter of offence to all of us in the House today—restore the capacity of the parliament of all the people of Canada to have some influence upon matters of such major national importance as the legislation before us today. Today, more important decisions on the future of Canada are made in the conference centre across the street than are made here in the House of Commons. That defies not only the principles of democratic government but also isolates the process of decision-making from the diverse and legitimate opinions which exist in the House. One of the means to restore respect for national institutions is to give these institutions meaningful work to do. I have indicated on other occasions the wide-ranging reforms we intend to bring to parliament to restore its capacity to contribute to national business and, when necessary, to restore its capacity to control the governments, a capacity which it no longer enjoys.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: One of those reforms will be to ensure that there is an opportunity for this parliament to discuss the options open to heads of government before they secrete themselves away at a private dinner to decide the nation's future. Our federal parliamentary system was not developed by accident or simply by a blind importation from elsewhere. We are a diverse country and we need institutions which both reflect and accommodate that diversity. The best institution for that purpose has been parliament, because it draws its membership from every corner of the country and has traditionally encouraged its members to express the views of their locale.

But parliament was never designed to be simply a talking shop: the assumption was that the Prime Minister and the cabinet who came from parliament would heed the views of the various locales. If they did not, in theory parliament would bring them down. But parliament, the forum of diversity, has lost this control over the executive, and the Prime Minister is increasingly able to construct a government which reflects his own views better than it reflects the diversity of the country.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: If that double-trend continues—the weakening of the forum of diversity and the empowering of a particular group—those regions and attitudes which lack power will naturally tire of the system and seek some other options. In effect, most of the federalist concern since the Quebec election has focused on the question: Can a Quebecer be a Canadian?

We can ask the question, as well, of residents of any other region—and it is important for us here in this assembly to remember that that question is not new. There are wise words from Professor Northrop Frye in his preface to his book “The Bush Garden, Essays on the Canadian Imagination”, in which he writes:

It is not always realized that unity and identity are quite different things to be promoting, and that in Canada they are perhaps more different than they are anywhere else. Identity is local or regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling.

Federal-Provincial Fiscal Arrangements

I think it is clear to us that the Canadian challenge has always been to balance the regional and the national without obliterating either. Today, the temptation is to retreat into the regions at the risk of losing sight of the nation. But that is a reaction to the trend in recent years where the tendency, fueled by this government, has been to impose a form of so-called national unity which has threatened local identity. The country was committed to universality in social programming, which suggested that we treat all regions as though they were the same, although we knew they were not.

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Of course national standards are necessary in this country, and we in this party will maintain that as a basic principle, but it is also necessary for us to sit down with the provinces and discuss the kind of flexibility which might be built into national standards to ensure that both national and local aims are realized, because in the name of national standards and joint programs this government has forced some provinces to forgo some programs which the duly elected governments of their locales thought would better serve their needs.

The central government has refused to move on cable, refused to grant provinces effective control of their offshore resources and continues to stall provincial status for the Yukon, all refusals which seem funded either on a fear of the regions or on an arrogant belief that the national government can understand local development better than can local governments. That arrogance is misplaced, and it is the unanimous view of the members of this party and of most of the country that we have nothing to fear from strong regions as long as there is a strong national government too.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: Indeed, there would be incalculable harm to Canada if we were to destroy the defining capacity of our local places and the defining identity of each of us who comes from those places to take our seats in this House of Commons, to bring the benefit of that experience to the cumulative business of Canada. Our virtue, as a Canadian community, is precisely that there is not one single way of being a Canadian and no uniform way of expressing our identity. Most of us enjoy that freedom from uniformity. It has let some of us become a Maureen Forrester or a Bobby Orr. It has allowed others to raise good families quietly or to pursue other private goals. Political freedom is rare enough in the world, but the kind of social and cultural freedom which is the hallmark of Canada is even less common.

We have established here, partly by design and partly by the accident of history, a respect for differences and a tradition of diversity which is rare and valuable, and without which we would all be much poorer. Most of us define ourselves by where we come from, so there is always the danger that we will also confine ourselves to where we come from. This nation is rare in the opportunity it allows us to keep our roots yet to go beyond them. The particular challenge to us, I think, was expressed in the quotation earlier from Professor Frye because