

Constitution Amendment, 1987

for first reading the first changes to the Official Languages Act in 17 years. Included in those changes were the promotion of French outside the Province of Quebec, and this involves a strong role for the Secretary of State. It therefore seems to me that the Government understood that plea and responded in a very impressive way. In that respect I do not think this Government needs to make any apology. We brought forward changes to the Act which would allow us to expand the opportunities for French outside the Province of Quebec.

Mr. Berger: Madam Speaker, the Minister has specific responsibility for minority language rights. He talks about amendments to the Official Languages Act. Why does the Minister not put the obligation to promote minority language rights into the Constitution and not just preserve the *status quo*?

He talked about the give and take of negotiations. We are all well aware of that and of the so-called negotiating prowess of the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney). Yet when we are drafting the Constitution, is it not fundamental that the federal Government should take its responsibilities to heart, not compromise, and insist that at least its obligation in this area is put into the clear language of the Constitution?

Mr. Mantha: What did you do when you were in power?

Mr. Crombie: Madam Speaker, with respect to the responsibilities for the promotion of French outside the Province of Quebec, the Government is not promising to do it. It is doing it! That is the difference between this Government and the Government of which he was a Member. That is why I mentioned that for 17 years there was no change. We brought in changes to the Act, and those changes will expand the opportunities for the use of French beyond Quebec. It is an excellent Bill. Indeed, the Commissioner of Official Languages recently wrote an essay commending the Government for it. It is the delivery of those programs which is needed, and that is what we are doing through the Official Languages Act.

• (1310)

Second, I think it lies idle in the mouth of the Hon. Member to suggest that the Prime Minister was not up to the mark with regard to negotiating skills. I remind him that when it was his turn in 1982 he was quite capable of supporting a resolution which did not even include the Province of Quebec. Many of us did that in order to support the Charter, but to use this now as a political tool to say that the Prime Minister did not negotiate well is unfounded. This negotiation was inspired by the Prime Minister and has the support of all three Parties and the 10 provinces. That is why it is historic.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Champagne): The period for questions and comments has now expired. Resuming debate.

[*English*]

Ms. Marion Dewar (Hamilton Mountain): Madam Speaker, it is a great privilege to rise today to speak on the Meech Lake Accord which is an historic agreement. I believe that we have had a period of great injury in this country and that a healing process is now taking place. That process is very important. I do recognize, however, that there are compromises in this Accord. I believe that Canadians have the ability to bridge some of the difficulties and will do so in the future.

So often we lose track of our historical roots. This country has the great benefit and privilege of having been conceived, not out of civil war, but out of partnership and compromise. People said that they could respect our different cultures and different religious backgrounds and were willing to protect them so that we could join hands and come together as a country.

I noted with sadness that some of the previous debate in this House weakened that resolve to form a strong country different from the country south of the border. It is sad to realize that the agreement put forward earlier this morning may weaken the union that we formed.

Some of the things which happened in the Meech Lake Accord are not dissimilar to things which happened in 1867. A group of people came together and said that it was very important that we respect the differences of others. As in the preliminary Charter, women were forgotten in the Meech Lake Accord, and I believe that that happened in 1867 as well. Through the Persons case, that was amended in the Supreme Court in London. However, the New Democrats believe that the rights of women are not eroded in the Accord. We would like women to be included in the abundance of caution which Senator Murray identified for aboriginal and multicultural people.

The Meech Lake Accord celebrates the fact that our country is becoming whole, and that is very important. We do recommend some very minor amendments. We believe that the major amendments which are being put forward are irresponsible because they can unravel the Accord. We believe that the Accord is precious and must be nurtured. We must look forward to the future with it.

Whether through oversight or not, Yukon and the Territories were ignored with regard to appointments to the Supreme Court of Canada and to the Senate. We believe that must be corrected.

The amending formula which ignores the right of the Northwest Territories and Yukon to become provinces must also be amended. No other province in this country had to have the unanimous support of all other provinces for that. There may be some flexibility there. Perhaps the political will of the people will convince the First Ministers that this slight amendment can be made without unravelling the Accord. These are the kinds of things that are very important.