

Senator Murray: Does my honourable friend intend to vote in the referendum on October 26 and, if so, will she be voting yes or no?

Senator Hébert: You do not have to answer that question.

Senator Wood: No, and I know what he wants me to say. However, I want to wait until I hear more about what is happening. It was not easy for me to say today that I would abstain. In fact, I changed that sentence two or three times in the past four or five days, but the more I read about this question the more I just could not go without saying that I would abstain. So quite honestly, I will wait until later, before making a decision on that matter.

Senator Murray: That is fair enough, honourable senators. I will put my friend down as doubtful.

[Translation]

Hon. Claude Castonguay: Honourable senators, we are starting a referendum debate that will be extremely important to the future of our country. We will soon be asked to answer yes or no to a single question: Are you in favour of renewed federalism on the basis of the agreement reached on August 28, 1992?

This evening, instead of discussing the various provisions of the agreement, I would rather discuss some of the implications of an affirmative or negative response.

To answer the question, our fellow citizens will, of course, want to examine the various provisions of the agreement reached by the first ministers and representatives of the Aboriginal peoples on August 28.

If they generally agree with what is being proposed and if they feel these proposals constitute a balanced response to the main concerns of Canadians in the various regions of this country, they will answer yes.

However, if they do not like or disagree with some of the provisions or deplore what they see as oversights or do not like the way a certain issue is dealt with, they are likely to answer in the negative. I am not saying this is not a responsible or intelligent approach, but I feel it is incomplete and may involve some very real risks.

First of all, we cannot isolate the present process from its context, and we cannot ignore the predictable consequences of a negative response.

The referendum on October 26 will be a unique event in our country's history. Considering the extremely elaborate consultation process and the negotiations conducted for weeks and months, I think this agreement represents what it was humanly possible to achieve at this time.

Basically, what we have here is an attempt to bring Quebec back into the Canadian Constitution, after the abortive attempts of 1982 and 1990. This agreement also attempts to restore the political balance between the various regions in this country by changing the composition of the House of

[Senator Wood.]

Commons and the Senate. It is an attempt to clarify and restructure the roles of both levels of government.

I think the realistic approach taken to this problem helps to reconcile two almost contradictory concepts of the country. There are those who, for valid reasons, believe in the need for greater decentralization, while others, whose reasons are equally valid, believe in the need for a stronger and more proactive central government.

The proposal also contains a Canada clause, which expresses the values to which Canadians in all the provinces are committed and the principles on the basis of which the country should continue to develop in the future. There is also a clause that describes the fundamental characteristics of this country and its people.

The agreement also recognizes the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-government and establishes the foundations of a social and economic union involving all Canadians.

This is a very substantial agreement. Others would probably emphasize a different aspect or a particular issue that was not covered. I am sure we all have our own ideas on the subject.

Personally, there are some questions I would have liked to see dealt with differently. However, I don't think that is the important thing here. We should realize that this agreement is the product of reasonable compromise and, as I said earlier, constitutes what it was humanly possible to achieve at this stage in our history.

I think we should also recognize the fact that we cannot regulate everything in the Constitution, as some people seem to think. The constitution of a country should contain, as someone said earlier, an expression of values and certain basic principles. One can only say so much in a constitutional text, simply because the application of the principles and the fundamental givens contained in the Constitution must always be one step ahead of circumstances that change with the passage of time.

As we have seen in the past, many questions can be legislated. They can also be dealt with through administrative agreements with the provinces.

We must realize that constitutional reform is a very difficult exercise.

When dealing with matters of principle and symbols, the slightest deference or compromise is soon perceived as a sign of weakness. As we have seen in Quebec during the past few weeks, for some people compromise is practically synonymous with betrayal.

We must also recognize the fact that the very democratic process to which we are—fortunately—committed does not make things any easier.

We all know it is extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to negotiate in the public view. Although this particular process included a number of confidential or private sessions, it was for all practical purposes a public process, because