

Second, speaking of principles, at least there are a few left in the Liberal Party to uphold them. I would direct that reply to the member from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce whom I recognize as being a man of principle who, for the last 30 years, has stood for what Liberalism in Canada is really about. He is currently in despair, along with many others, on seeing the complete change of heart undergone by the same party to which he has been committed for so long. Everything the Liberal Party stood for is beginning to crumble because the polls say we want a change.

Hon. Lowell Murray: May I ask Senator Kirby how this budget ensures the maintenance of national standards in those programs that have been covered by the Canada Assistance Plan and Established Programs Financing?

In asking the question, I cannot help but remark in passing that, two years ago, the honourable senator was seated in almost that same place, and at that time denounced with the greatest vigor the modest and very moderate restraints on the federal government spending power that were introduced as part of the Meech Lake accord.

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, I wish to point out that speeches have a 15-minute duration, including questions. That is the rule. However, do I assume that there is a desire on the part of honourable senators to allow the honourable senator to continue?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Speaker: We shall continue.

Senator Kirby: Honourable senators, is there some suggestion that the rules which were jammed down our throats some time ago now are causing some problems for members opposite? I am sorry to see that.

To respond to Senator Murray, my opposition to Meech Lake was not based entirely on the spending powers. It was based on a whole variety of other issues.

I said that national standards would be maintained. I said that they would be maintained not only through the budget but through other measures. Take medicare as an example. The Canada Health Act is obviously not a budget bill or a fiscal measure. I do not believe it is inconsistent to move in the direction where you have greater flexibility at the local level, while still maintaining national standards.

Senator Murray: I appreciate that. The honourable senator knows in considerable detail how these things work. The question is one of enforcement. The government has committed itself to enforcement to the extent that at least one minister, perhaps the Prime Minister himself, has said that they would find other ways of reducing cash transfers to provinces, perhaps even reducing equalization payments to provinces, that did not conform to the federal government's notion of our national standard. There are three provinces that do not even receive equalization payments.

I ask the honourable senator whether he does not believe that these threats are pretty hollow?

Senator Kirby: Without getting into a discussion of what particular enforcement mechanism is likely to ultimately come into effect, the fact is that I do believe there are a variety of ways in which enforcement can be carried out. I honestly believe it will be relatively straightforward to develop processes which ensure that national standards are implemented without necessarily doing it exclusively through the replacement of the Established Programs Financing, or EPF. There are other ways of doing it.

Senator Kinsella: We all accept the dynamic nature of society. Because of that, we recognize in public policymaking that one must look forward and be progressive.

Senator Kirby: Let the record show that my colleague said "progressive" and not "Progressive Conservative."

Senator Kinsella: Towards the end of your speech, you make reference to Reform. This is what has a lot of Canadians quite concerned. Many of us feel that there has been a shift, in policy and in principle, from the grand tradition of the Liberal Party of Canada towards a Reform type of agenda.

I was somewhat startled to hear you use that word. Perhaps you would like to explain it, particularly in light of the vision that you hold as to where we are headed, for example, when the budget speaks of a \$7 billion cut from the social envelope? What is the vision of Canada for tomorrow? Will we be the caring and compassionate society that successive governments have been progressive and liberal towards, in the world of the 21st century as well?

Senator Kirby: First of all, given the gun control bill which is in the other place, I find it difficult to accuse this government of having a Reform-minded agenda. It is hard to argue that we have adopted the position of the Reform Party when you see the reactions of their members to gun control.

I assume you were only talking about a certain portion of the Reform agenda. The reality is that in order to be able to afford to finance social programs and other programs down the road in this country, you must have your fiscal house in order. That is the economic reality.

I accept Senator Kinsella's observation that this party has stood for, does stand for, and will continue to stand for being compassionate, caring and concerned about individual Canadians and regions of the country that need assistance or an element of redistribution to help them continue with an adequate quality of life. However, unless the government ultimately gets its fiscal house in order, unless we begin to clean up the mess that we inherited, the reality is that we will not be able to provide those services or a lot of other services that Canadians need.

If you look at what is happening federally and provincially with respect to parties, be they Liberal, Conservative or New Democratic, and if you look at what is happening in other Western industrialized countries, you will understand that the number one priority of all governments these days must be fiscal responsibility. If you do not meet that priority, you will be unable to do the other things that you correctly identified this party as having stood for, for a long time.