

Constitution Acts

Ms. McLaughlin: There is an NDP Government in the Yukon.

Mr. Daubney: The motion before us today concerns the ongoing evolution of territorial participation at First Ministers Conferences. In my remarks I want to emphasize just how far we have come in providing a greater role for the territories in such conferences since our Government came to office in 1984.

I had the honour of being a member of the special joint committee of the House and the other place that looked at the Constitution Act of 1987. The Member will know that our committee heard a number of witnesses from the territories and a number of witnesses from aboriginal groups, and we gave very serious attention to the concerns that they expressed. We also expressed sympathy for many of the points that they raised and suggested amendments that First Ministers might wish to consider on subsequent rounds.

Under the Meech Lake Accord, which has now been ratified once again by Parliament and by eight Legislative Assemblies, there is a guarantee of First Ministers Conferences on the economy and other matters at least once a year. This provision has not attracted much attention during public and parliamentary discussion of the Accord. Perhaps we as Canadians have become a bit blasé and too easily take for granted the co-ordinating work done by First Ministers conferences. I want to remind Hon. Members that not so long ago the very convocation of such conferences was itself a matter for endless federal-provincial discord.

Until 1985 First Ministers Conferences took place if and when the Prime Minister saw fit. Premiers had to spend much time and energy asking to meet with the Prime Minister and putting forward shopping lists of issues that needed to be addressed. Public opinion was a weapon in this game, so national priorities could be set in exchange for headlines. That changed after our Government came to office with a mandate to seek national reconciliation to end the confrontation and mistrust that had marked federal-provincial relations for too long.

When he was Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister made his commitment in an historic address at Sept-Îles on August 6, 1984. It was there that he laid down his program for bringing Québec back into the constitutional family "with honour and enthusiasm". The program triumphantly concluded with the Meech Lake Accord. But he did more; he also said the following in his speech:

To end parallel or incomplete planning once and for all between the two orders of Government, we will set up a federal-provincial advisory and co-ordinating body. It will operate at the highest level, namely with the 11 leaders themselves working together in an appropriate institutional framework, advising on the options envisaged and the directions to take.

The First Ministers Conference is a forum where the provinces can make their special concerns known so that federal programs are framed in ways that work for all Canadians, wherever they live and whatever their social and economic setting. As Hon. Members know, the Prime Minister quickly reached the goal of co-ordination that he fixed at Sept-Îles.

• (1510)

At their Regina meeting in 1985, First Ministers unanimously agreed to meet at least once a year for a period of five years. The agenda items of these annual conferences was to include the following: A review of the state of federal-provincial relations; consultation on major issues concerning both orders of Government; and in particular the state of the economy; consideration of broad objectives for Governments in Canada; and exchanging information to facilitate planning for the operations of their Governments.

Three conferences have since been held, first in Halifax, then in Vancouver, and last year in Toronto. These conferences illustrate how First Ministers Conferences can set and move forward an agenda in areas where co-operation between the two spheres of government is essential.

In an address to the Institute of Public Administration of Canada in Saint John last September 3, the Minister of Federal-Provincial Relations, Senator Lowell Murray, said:

Canadians know too well how easy it is to let political rivalries stand in the way of good economic and social policies. Most of our institutions—whether they be industrial relations, parliamentary or judicial—are premised on an adversarial model. We need to place much more emphasis on consensus-building institutions to achieve all we are capable of as a nation.

First Ministers Conferences are an institution. They provide a framework for continuing federal-provincial meetings of Ministers and officials and impose what Senator Murray called "a healthy discipline" on them.

A forthcoming conference represents a deadline to be met, and First Ministers can also, when necessary, break deadlocks. As Senator Murray told the Institution:

Our approach to federal-provincial relations is firmly based in reality. No matter what the actual jurisdictional division of power, Canada's eleven governments function in an interdependent world. Each government's policy actions inevitably affect the other, and good policies cannot be developed in isolation . . .

The real challenge before our federation is to seek agreement and shared purpose on the best policies for Canadians. This is rarely easy, but policy innovation and government responsiveness is nurtured by strong governments and the interaction between them.

Regularity lends stability to the annual planning cycle of all Governments, running through the preparation and presentation of Budgets in the first half of the following year, Premiers' conferences, the preparation of Speeches from the Throne.

It also ensures that when decisions are made by Governments at both levels, it is with an up-to-date appreciation of what the impact may be on the broader scheme of things.

I would like to turn now to the specific question of territorial attendance at federal-provincial First Ministers Conferences.

The government leaders of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories have been invited, as you know, Mr. Speaker, to sit at the table at the First Ministers Conferences convened under the terms of Part IV of the Constitution Act, 1982. These conferences are of particular and direct interest to the territories and to the aboriginal peoples of Canada.