

*Oral Questions*

million. That is the basis of our claim for federal compensation, which was transmitted to the federal Minister of Finance by Mr. Gérard-D. Lévesque on May 7, 1993." The letter goes on to say: "Unfortunately, no payment could be made before Mr. Mulroney left." Now for the crucial passage: "although Mr. Mulroney indicated last March that Quebec would be fairly compensated in this respect". How can the Prime Minister deny the existence of an agreement, considering Mr. Bourassa's own very clear testimony which he put down in writing?

**Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister):** Mr. Speaker, Mr. Bourassa and Mr. Gérard-D. Lévesque wrote to the government about this. I am aware of that. The Minister of Finance also discussed the matter with the Minister of Finance of Canada. This is about a request, a claim made by Quebec. It is not a commitment. A commitment exists when the federal government agrees to pay. However, there is no indication in any document that the government agreed to do so. If conversations took place between Mssrs. Mulroney and Bourassa, I would be delighted to know what they were about. I called Mr. Mulroney, who did not give me an answer, but perhaps the Leader of the Opposition, who knows Mr. Mulroney very well, could call him and ask him whether he gave his consent, yes or no.

• (1420)

**The Speaker:** I would ask hon. members to make their questions and answers as brief as possible.

**Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition):** Mr. Speaker, Robert Bourassa, in the course of his duties as premier and bound by his oath of office, testifies in this letter to the existence of an agreement and a commitment made by his counterpart, the federal Prime Minister. That is the truth.

On September 22 in this House, the Prime Minister challenged the Bloc Québécois to give him, and I quote: "proof that my predecessor and the previous government made a commitment, and we will gladly pay". Here is the proof. Now, pay.

**Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister):** Mr. Speaker, I would not advise the Leader of the Opposition to go back to practising law, if he makes statements like that.

He says that Mr. Bourassa said that Mr. Mulroney—whom you know very well, who took you at your word and then you went back on it—told him such and such a thing. I do not doubt that Mr. Bourassa wrote the letter, since I read it. However, I asked the Privy Council to go through all the documentation. Was there anything in writing? Did a discussion take place in cabinet or elsewhere to confirm this letter? I was told that nothing could be found.

I called Mr. Mulroney and I told him: Mr. Mulroney, I am sending you a letter with a request to clarify the situation. He said that he would reply very shortly. I said in the House that if

there was a commitment, it would be respected, and if there was no commitment, you can blame Mr. Mulroney.

**Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval):** Mr. Speaker, on December 15, 1993, Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa wrote the Prime Minister of Canada, the hon. member for Saint-Maurice, to confirm the existence of a verbal agreement between himself and the former Prime Minister of Canada. This letter was signed and dated December 15.

Following the questions Bloc Québécois members have been asking in this House for several months on this subject, could the Prime Minister not have shown good will by checking with Mr. Mulroney, right after Mr. Bourassa made the request, if he really wanted to be fair to Quebecers? Should he not have done so a long time ago instead of waiting for the opposition to force his hand a few days ago?

**Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister):** Mr. Speaker, the opposition says that there was an agreement. In my opinion, any agreement requires the consent of both parties. We found no evidence that the former government gave its consent. We recently asked Mr. Mulroney. We asked Privy Council officials and others who worked with these former first ministers, and they told us that there never was a commitment.

I went one step further: I called Mr. Mulroney himself. I talked to him on the telephone and he told me that he would confirm his position in writing. Once we know his position, we will take action. If he made promises to Mr. Bourassa, I will be very happy to honour them. If he did not make promises at the time and personally refused to pay when he was leading the government, I am not responsible for the actions of another government that did not want to pay. I was not involved in this matter.

I would like to say to the opposition that Alberta and British Columbia also wanted to hold provincial referendums but, under the circumstances, they preferred, to avoid the costs involved and to be sure they would get paid, to have the referendum held under federal legislation.

• (1425)

**Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval):** Mr. Speaker, given the attitude of the officials surrounding the Prime Minister who have been playing hide-and-seek for several months in this matter and the fact that the Prime Minister of Canada questions the very word of the former Quebec premier, does the Prime Minister not agree that his attitude, far from being a sign of co-operation with Quebec, points to a conspiracy against that province?

**Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister):** Mr. Speaker, a prime minister cannot act alone. The opposition would be the first to blame me if I took on financial commitments without cabinet and Treasury Board approval. Of course, if I give my word, they will honour it; on the other hand, legally, without a cabinet decision and Treasury Board approval, there can be no government commitment.