

Senator Bonnell: Now I don't know whom I should direct my question to.

Senator Simard: You have a question?

Senator Bonnell: I have a question.

Senator Simard: We are taking notes.

Senator Bonnell: I am not making a speech, although some senators try to have a debate in the middle of Question Period in order to use up our time.

In the proposed free trade agreement between Mexico and Canada—and I don't know if the United States is still in it or whether it is the hamburger in the sandwich between Canada and Mexico, because President Bush is no longer talking in the way he is supposed to do at these great conferences.

I understand that the Canadian Chamber of Commerce has been given a briefing. We in the Senate of Canada, the senior house of Parliament of this nation, have not been given a briefing. I was wondering if officials might come before the Senate and give us a briefing. We could invite them into a Committee of the Whole and, if necessary, have a closed-door hearing so that neither the press nor anyone else could hear the secret, whatever it is, that they do not want the public of Canada to know. At least they might be able to advise us, the representatives of this nation in the Upper House.

Could we expect such a briefing from the Government of Canada concerning this free trade agreement?

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I will take under advisement the question of the honourable senator, and the apparent desire of honourable senators opposite to obtain more information on these negotiations. I will consult with my cabinet colleague Mr. Wilson on that matter.

Meanwhile, I assure the honourable senator that Parliament will have the opportunity, as it did in the case of the free trade agreement with the United States, to review and debate the legislation implementing any North American free trade agreement that is arrived at.

Senator Bonnell: Thank you, honourable senator. In years gone by, when I first became involved in politics, the government always informed the legislature of what it was doing before it informed the Chamber of Commerce. The government used to make announcements in the legislature. certainly, the Parliament of Canada should be told first, but now the Chamber of Commerce is told first, the representatives of the country are told next, and the people of the country come last of all.

THE CONSTITUTION

ADVISABILITY OF NATIONAL REFERENDUM

Hon. M. Lorne Bonnell: Let me ask another question. I noticed that, yesterday, the Prime Minister told us how pleased he was with the referendum that took place in South Africa. Because of that referendum, has the Prime Minister now realized what a great tool it is for getting the public

opinion of a country? Is he prepared to have a referendum in Canada concerning the Constitution?

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I am not sure that the history of our country would bear out the assertion that the honourable senator has made. All I can tell him is that in the last Speech from the Throne the government undertook to consult the public on constitutional matters. This has been done through the Spicer Commission, the Beaudoin-Edwards Committee and the Beaudoin-Dobbie Committee. I do not exclude the possibility that there will be other consultations of various kinds before the matter is resolved.

We have never excluded the possibility of a national plebiscite or referendum.

Senator Bonnell: I understand. In other words, honourable senators, we thought we could cross our "t"s and dot our "i"s any way we liked. When the honourable senator was the minister responsible for federal-provincial relations, we could not cross "t"s or dot "i"s or change anything. We had a seamless web. Apparently it is not a seamless web any more. We might some day have a referendum on the Constitution so that the people of Canada can be informed of things before the Chamber of Commerce.

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

NATIONAL REFERENDUM—REMOVAL OF TRADE EMBARGO— GOVERNMENT POSITION

Hon. M. Lorne Bonnell: Let me ask a further question concerning the referendum in South Africa. Since the referendum went so strongly for the "yes" vote, has the Government of Canada given any consideration to removing the trade embargo against South Africa so that we can perhaps sell the Canadian goods we are losing our export markets for in the rest of world?

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, that matter is now under consideration.

Senator Bonnell: By whom? By senator Simard or yourself?

Senator Frith: Senator Simard is duly taking notes.

JUSTICE

CANCELLATION OF COURT CHALLENGES PROGRAM— GOVERNMENT POSITION

Hon. Dalia Wood: Honourable senators, I have a question for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

The President of Treasury Board has eliminated a vital program, the Court Challenges Program. The abolition of the program will affect hundreds of groups and individuals who have already started a challenge at the trial level. What will happen to trials that are either at the appeal stage or otherwise? Will the government fund them right to the end?

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I do not what the arrangements are in those