

• (1750)

[English]

Mr. Keith Penner (Cochrane—Superior): Madam Speaker, this motion serves to ratify the 1987 Constitutional Accord, more commonly known as the Meech Lake Accord, or the Langevin Accord after it was modestly modified to place in the Accord a non-derogation clause which, it was believed, would protect the aboriginal people and the multicultural nature of society from the duality that the Meech Lake Accord emphasizes.

That modification indicates that it was recognized that there were certain weaknesses, but that the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) and the Premiers were not prepared to deal with them. They took so much satisfaction in having reached an arrangement that they closed their eyes to the many weaknesses in this document.

It is difficult for me to resist the temptation to be immoderate in expressing my feelings on this agreement. Quite frankly and candidly my own view is that this is a bad piece of constitutional work. It is out of step and out of keeping with the type of Canada in which we live. I see it as a throw-back to another time when the *ancien régime* or a model of that nature predominated in Quebec, and when the United Empire Loyalists dominated Upper Canada. That time has long since past.

This agreement fails to reflect the reality of modern Canada. I am convinced that gradually over time this document will serve to change the character of Canada so that our search, sometimes even a struggle for a national identity, which has always been elusive and difficult to grasp, will become well nigh impossible to achieve as we tend more and more to go our own ways as provinces and regions.

I am sometimes asked what is wrong with the constitutional amendment of 1987, the Meech Lake Accord. What is wrong is that it gives validity to the view that our nation is no more than a community of communities, what former Prime Minister Trudeau once disparagingly described as a loose association of shopping centres.

Mr. Crosbie: Nonsense.

Mr. Penner: This Accord permits and encourages political power to flow from the centre into the provincial capitals, and it leaves unanswered the question of who will speak for all Canadians when there is a reason to have someone speak for all Canadians.

A few weeks ago I had an opportunity to speak to an Ontario cabinet Minister. Among other things, we discussed the Meech Lake Accord. I told him I did not like it.

Mr. Crosbie: Which they are supporting.

Mr. Penner: Yes, they are supporting it. The Hon. Minister of Transport (Mr. Crosbie) has interjected that they are supporting it. I wish to tell the Hon. Minister of Transport that

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the cabinet Minister stated that we cannot blame Premier Peterson, to which I replied that I did not blame him. The cabinet Minister stated that they had been given far more than they expected or asked for, and how could that be turned down.

Mr. Crosbie: Absolutely.

Mr. Penner: That is right. In other words, we sold the farm for an old run-down half-ton truck.

I am convinced that the shift in power that is bound to take place over time will make the provincial capitals the preferred centres of action. That will relegate this national forum and Parliament into something that is analogous to the European Parliament that now sits in Strasbourg. Of course, the provinces will still make use of us. They will still like to use us as the collection agency. After all, collecting taxes is never a pleasant duty. Over time, Parliament will be a centre for the debating of vague resolutions that will carry very little in the way of effective influence. The Prime Minister's duties are bound to be significantly altered as he or she will become the person chairing the annual meetings of First Ministers. At one meeting they will discuss the economy. At another meeting they will discuss an agenda—they have actually put an agenda right into the Constitution. Forever and a day they must discuss the Senate. They must discuss fisheries, and they must discuss such other matters as may be agreed to. We can just imagine that meeting, "Is there any discussion on the Senate? None. Any discussion on fisheries? None. Are there any other matters that we can agree on? No." Meeting adjourned. How can something like that be put into the Constitution and call it a good piece of constitutional work?

The description of Quebec as a distinct society is a difficult and troublesome concept. If the Accord were modified in a number of ways, perhaps I would be able to swallow this notion. If definite steps were taken in the agreement to prevent or assure Canadians that there was no dilution of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, particularly women's rights, if steps were taken to guarantee and advance aboriginal rights, if the political future of Canadians living north of 60 were not blocked, as they certainly are by the Meech Lake Accord, if all of those safeguards were built in, as the Liberal amendments to this Accord attempt to do, then, reluctantly and hesitantly, I could perhaps accept the distinct society of Quebec, but I would never like it. I would never feel comfortable with it.

• (1800)

I think that to describe Quebec as a distinct society is really an insult to many other Canadians who live in the various regions and areas of Canada. Distinctiveness in Quebec, it is argued, is based on language and culture. But surely there are numerous other equally valid categories of distinctiveness if we want to play the game of distinctiveness. I sense, when I cross the Rockies and go to our western most province, that there is distinctiveness there. I certainly feel it north of 60 and on the Prairies.