

Constitutional Renewal

The first thing to point out following yesterday's meeting is that it resulted in a collective decision which could prove most beneficial for Canada. In effect, all first ministers have committed themselves to reach by September major decisions on the constitution, and in order to do so they have given themselves a very tight three-month schedule of meetings and negotiations.

In fact, Madam Speaker, we have made a commitment, in our own name and in the name of our ministers and officials, to spend during the next three months twice as much time on the constitutional problem as was spent in the last two years by the federal and provincial governments combined.

This is evidence of the importance and urgency that both myself and the premiers attach to the renewal of the Canadian federalism and of our constitution. It is also a sign of our strong will to fulfil the promise we have made to Canadians to bring real and substantial improvements to the fundamental law of this country.

[English]

The hope of the federal government was that the premiers would want to join with us in urgent and effective action to give Canada a new constitution which will be fully responsive to the present and future needs of the country and its people. That hope has now grown into a joint federal-provincial commitment.

I, therefore, want to pay tribute to the premiers' open-mindedness and generosity of spirit which made that commitment possible. I realize we could not have made that commitment if we were not aware of the strong support for real reform among the people we represent, so I gladly pay tribute also to the spirit and the will of the people of Canada at this decisive moment in our history.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trudeau: I am confident that the next three months of very concentrated effort will produce, at the next meeting of first ministers in the second week of September, an agreement on the so-called short list of issues which we discussed yesterday. I am equally convinced that if we fail to reach substantial agreement in September we will be courting disaster for Canada. In that event, the federal government would have to give very serious consideration to its options and recommend to Parliament a plan of action which would allow us to fulfil our responsibilities to the people of Canada.

It was drawn to my attention that, subject to correction, the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) would have said words somewhat to that effect last Friday and such is the case. I am encouraged to hear that, if properly reported, he would have indicated that if there were a deadlock in discussions at the first ministers' level, then Parliament would have to take its responsibilities. That is also my view and, also subject to correction, I believe it would be the view of the Leader of the New Democratic Party (Mr. Broadbent). I am very encouraged by this.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trudeau: I am confident that the agreement we seek will both strengthen the rights and freedoms of the people and define a division of federal and provincial powers which will enable Canada to achieve its great potential. I am determined that, in our progress toward agreement, we will not engage in any trading-off of the rights and freedoms of the people against the powers of governments.

With the consent of the House, Madam Speaker, I will table the documents I distributed to the premiers yesterday. They are a meeting agenda, a statement of principles for a new constitution, a list of priority issues, and a calendar of meetings for first ministers and ministers between June 17 and September 12.

With regard to the priority issues, Madam Speaker, I would not want to mislead the House in any way. The copies which I have tabled and the copies which were distributed are a statement by the federal government. The list itself has been amended by adding one item to the list which we brought to the meeting yesterday, the item of fisheries. The only other difference between the list now tabled and the list that we circulated at yesterday's meeting is that our list yesterday had two columns; one column lists items that are of general interest to the people of Canada and the other column lists items concerning the division of powers between governments.

I commend to the earnest attention of all hon. members the two documents dealing with principles and priorities. It would be my hope that members from every part of Canada, and of all parties, would consider and discuss the contents of these papers among themselves and with their constituents.

Such consideration and discussion would not only assist the federal and provincial governments and Parliament and legislatures in our progress toward constitutional renewal, but would also help ensure that Parliament will play its full and rightful role in the building of the Canada of the future.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

• (1510)

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, I want to make a brief response to the statement of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and I will have some questions following the response of the Leader of the New Democratic Party (Mr. Broadbent).

I want to begin by thanking the Prime Minister, on behalf of the House, for reporting so quickly to Parliament on the Prime Minister's conference yesterday.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: Judging by the Prime Minister's statement and the public comments of other participants, it appears that the first ministers' meeting yesterday made a reasonable start on the process of constitutional change and there is no question that all members of the House applaud that progress.