

The Constitution

We have heard some scathing attacks from the official opposition on the package, but what is the alternative hon. members opposite are talking about? I have read their speeches several times. I have looked through the speeches of the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. member for Provencher, the hon. member for Rosedale (Mr. Crombie) and other official opposition spokesmen who have spoken in this debate. They are all over the map. They talk about the Vancouver consensus. They hold it up like the Holy Grail as if it were the solution to everything. Let us have a look at it. It provides that seven provinces which make up 50 per cent of the population can, in conjunction with the federal government, effect an amendment to the constitution. It says 50 per cent, and although the hon. member for Provencher said he did not feel too comfortable with that and he thought it should be two-thirds, he said he would go along with it. Two paragraphs later in his speech, however, he attacked our formula which requires over 50 per cent in each of the four regions and said that that is the tyranny of 51 per cent. Yet the opposition embraces a formula which requires a fair 50 per cent of the population of this country as represented by their provincial governments.

● (1900)

An hon. Member: That is not the whole story.

Mr. Smith: You are right, that is not the whole story because it gets worse. They then have an opting-out formula which is not, to my understanding, within the tradition of this country, with one province opting out of this and another opting out of that. The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), quite properly, labelled that provision a checker board sort of formula which would result in different parts of the country having different laws. What does a country mean when you have that sort of thing happening across the land?

The hon. member for Rosedale, who gave us a good speech and told us some truths, spoke about the five principles of Canadian confederation. Two of them were national union and consensus. I submit that the opting-out provision runs counter to the theme which he was developing. Why, then, does the Leader of the Opposition think the Vancouver consensus is so great? I will tell you why. He thinks it is great because, with the opting-out provision, he does not have to choose between premiers. He does not have to choose between Lougheed and Davis and between all these Tory premiers across the country who cannot get their act together. So it is an easy way out.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Smith: That is why they like the Vancouver consensus. Consensus—what a joke!

If the House has been following the conference attended by the premiers last week in Toronto, hon. members would realize that it is literally laughable to talk about consensus. But that is the route he wants to take. If that is leadership, they can have it. That is not the sort of leadership that this country needs and it is not the leadership that this government has been

giving. I think we need to have a constitutional framework which will keep this country together.

Then, on top of that, they have this odd idea about a constituent assembly, but we did not hear too much about that. The only person who spoke about that was the hon. member for Provencher, but he did not say what they were going to do. "It would be a terrible thing if we had a provision in a constitution which allows a referendum," they say, but somehow it is okay to set up a constitutional assembly, according to them. Where do they get their mandate? I am not quite sure about that, it has not been too clearly spelled out.

So I submit that the opposition does not have its act together; it is all over the map on this and, in fact, there is no alternative. We have one clear option which has been presented, and it is a reasonable one, one on which we are going to move, one that will carry and one in which we will all be proud to play a part.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Smith: There is one final point I should like to make, and that is that I for one happen to think it is possible to make some improvements to the charter. I think that is the function of the committee. Some hon. members might be aware of the fact that I am chairman of the committee on the handicapped and disabled. I happen to believe that the charter would be improved if a specific reference to them were included in it. I have spoken on this before and I intend to carry on with this idea and hope to address the committee on that. It would not be a new thing which would open the floodgates to many minority groups because, in fact, a precedent has already been established in the Human Rights Act. The reference in it to the rights of the handicapped and disabled would improve even further what I believe to be a sound and good charter.

After having had the opportunity to travel across the country with the committee and to listen to people speak, I can assure you that Canadians from coast to coast, particularly disabled Canadians, feel very strongly about their rights. They do not really feel certain about them being guaranteed by the various provincial governments of this land. We heard over 600 briefs and many of them spoke to this issue. Without exception they support the concept of a charter enshrining rights. I hope it will ultimately be expanded and made clear that those rights refer specifically to disabled Canadians.

As I have said earlier, I am pleased to participate in what I believe is an historic debate. I am proud to be here tonight to take part in this debate because I think we are doing something that is historic, something that will be good for Canada and which, I think, when completed, will allow us to get on to other things.

Hon. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I may find that I am a voice crying in the wilderness, but there is a plea that I should like to make at this stage in our proceedings and I want to make it as earnestly as I can.

We are just about at the end of this debate on the motion to set up a joint committee to deal with the constitution, and the