

*Federal-Provincial Relations*

Robertson. I think this bill is the first in a series of steps that the Prime Minister is going to take in constitutional reform in this country.

● (1620)

The Prime Minister said in his speech on the Address in reply to the Speech from the Throne that he considered constitutional reform to be a very high priority of this new administration. The step he is taking today in bringing this bill before us will, in my view, set the stage for building blocks leading to constitutional reform.

I am not opposed to constitutional reform. In fact you will see from my remarks this afternoon how very much I am in favour of it. It is precisely because constitutional reform is so important that it must be done in the right way. I think the person who will be in an instrumental position as a result of this bill, namely Mr. Gordon Robertson, or whoever is the incumbent of the secretaryship, should be a minister of the Crown. I therefore oppose the bill for that reason, and not because I do not want to see an improvement in federal-provincial relations or steps to improve them. I oppose the bill because I do not want this delicate and powerful structure to be in the hands of a person who cannot come into this House and be questioned by members of parliament.

In my brief time in the House of Commons I have seen the manner in which the senior civil servants of the government, particularly that handful who are in a very influential position to affect policy, approach premiers of the provinces. This bill will bolster this powerful structure and style of the government which is, in fact, an end run around the House of Commons.

These senior civil servants have adopted this approach with the blessing of the Prime Minister and his government who are in favour of excessive centralization of power in this country to the exclusion of members of the House of Commons. After this bill goes through, and surely it will pass, we will be in the position of having the incumbent in that office conducting very delicate negotiations on such subjects as energy and the implementation of social policy around the country. The secretary will be conducting these negotiations with the premiers in such a way that we will not be privy to those negotiations. I object to this very seriously. I have a number of objections I wish to present to the House this afternoon because I consider this subject very important.

I would like the Prime Minister to understand that I am presenting my arguments in a constructive way. I repeat that what the Prime Minister is setting out on, or moving toward, is constitutional reform. I only want this done in a manner in which I, as a member of parliament, can participate. In a moment or two I will make some rather substantial references to why it is so important that members of parliament should participate.

Before we leave the matter of the secretaryship of Mr. Gordon Robertson I wish to have it clearly understood that I regard him as a man of high principles, of great experience, and an asset to our country. However, I am very interested in knowing what Mr. Gordon Robertson believes about this whole area of federal-provincial relations and the implementation of the report on the constitution brought down during a previous parliament by a

[Mr. Roche.]

joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons. I want to know what he thinks, since his name has been raised more than once by the Prime Minister. I want to know what he stands for in this whole area of social policy, energy, and the other very real matters in respect of which he will be negotiating.

It is not good enough to have the incumbent of that office report to the Prime Minister, precisely because of the power he will wield in the negotiations with the premiers of the provinces. I want that incumbent to be here in the House, and I would repeat the thrust of my message this afternoon, that the incumbent of such an office should be a minister of the Crown.

I do not want it understood that this will require more bureaucracy. This could be a very small office. I would remind hon. members on this point that the minister of governmental affairs for the province of Alberta runs the smallest office of that entire government, at a minimal expense. Because he is a minister he is able to conduct the kind of consultations in the proper relationship that are so absolutely essential. His is a style I wish we could have emulated here as we move forward in federal intergovernmental relations.

This matter is important because it involves not only the setting up of an office which will handle federal-provincial relations, but because it begins to touch on the central area of constitutional division of power. This is why the Prime Minister is taking such care to get this done in the way he wants it done. This is certainly not the way I want it done. This matter touches on the whole question of decentralization of federal government departments.

I am glad the Minister of Regional Economic Expansion (Mr. Jamieson) is here, as I intend to make reference to his department in a moment.

This matter also touches on the whole area of intergovernmental relations and the manner in which they should be conducted, and in that respect I would refer particularly to tri-level conferences. When I think of federal-provincial relations, or intergovernmental relations, I try to see where this bill is taking us, and I must put it in the framework of where we are today in this country.

When we think of the characteristics of this country we can see why this matter is so vital to the wellbeing of the country, and why it is so important that federal-provincial relations be formalized in a manner that takes into account the ability of members of parliament to participate.

Let me refer to the two important characteristics of this country today in terms of intergovernmental relationships. First, whether we like it or not, we are becoming a nation run by the government, and I say that with reference to the three levels of government, not just to the federal government. The second important characteristic of this country today can be related to our urbanization, and that is why this whole question is so important. We must consider how dependent upon the government this country is becoming. The facts and figures in this regard are quite familiar to us all.

We know that governments at all levels are growing faster than the economy, and the Economic Council of