

The Constitution

Mr. George Proud (Hillsborough): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour for me to rise this evening to speak on this very great issue that we are talking about these last number of months.

Canadians face many challenges on many fronts today: the economy, the environment and the Constitution. At no time has the need for national unity and consensus on Canada's future been greater.

127 years ago the Fathers of Confederation gathered in Charlottetown to transform their shared values, ideas and dreams into a vision and that vision into the framework for a country, a country that is the envy of many nations throughout the world.

We now face a new challenge: that of reforming our Constitution to ensure the responsiveness of our institutions of government to the social, the economic and the political realities of Canada as we approach the 21st century. I feel it is important that we keep apprised of issues at hand and of the ideas advanced by our constituents in order to strengthen national unity through a framework of constitutional reform.

My constituents' vision for the future is inspired by a number of practical realities about the nature of Canada. They believe that all Canadians share a desire to live together in a federal state based on common values and principles. Let us not throw away those things that we have been able to achieve.

Let us continue to pay heed to the different languages and the ethnic groups in this country. My constituents have a strong attachment to the preservation and the strengthening of fundamental rights and freedoms. While remaining sensitive to the issue of collective rights, my constituents believe that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms must continue to have primacy over all federal and provincial legislation.

Constitutional amendments should not reduce the primacy of the charter. The people of Hillsborough believe that we must strengthen our economic union. It is essential to Canada's existence as a federal state that the full benefits of unrestricted mobility of people, goods and capital be assured by the basic laws governing the country.

We must continue to develop internationally competitive products, services, technologies and strategies responsive to the demands of globalization. I have heard repeatedly that we must achieve practical measures which fully integrate Canada's regions and the decision and policy making processes at the national level.

A reformed Senate which is elected, which is effective and has a more equitable distribution of seats is an essential element of constitutional reform and a mechanism to ensure that the aspirations of Atlantic Canada and of western Canada are given the fullest consideration.

Such a Senate could have the power to examine appointments to important federal institutions and agencies and it could protect the rights of minority language groups.

As we talk about the reform of the Senate, we must talk about the changes in it that we would like to see happen. I also believe that this Chamber, the House of Commons, is in need of reform. This institution, which is the highest court in the land, must play a vital role in all aspects of our society. I believe this institution must work, that every member of this Parliament must have a say in the way that legislation proceeds, in the way that legislation starts out and in the way that legislation ends up.

It is time that this institution becomes the institution that I envisaged many years ago, that we are law-makers and that the laws are not just passed down from the executive branch, but also come from this part of the Parliament as well. I believe there is room and it is needed in this day and age. I certainly believe that we must change this House so that it becomes a greater working institution. If it has to become more like the U.S. Congress then so be it, but this will make it a better institution for all Canadians.

Of course, constitutional renewal means a realignment of powers. The fundamental principle guiding the process of renewal must be that legislative powers reside with the level of government that can handle them best. We must adopt a functional approach. The essential focus must be an arrangement which best serves the needs not of governments, not of bureaucrats, not of politicians, but of the people. Any new arrangement must ensure the flexibility to meet the changing demands and the challenges of the future.

In many areas the federal and the provincial governments should be able to legislate in a complementary manner. For example, in the area of the environment the federal government should be able to pass framework legislation stipulating national standards, leaving it up to the provinces to adapt these national standards to regional and provincial realities, and a similar approach where the federal government enacts national framework legislation so that the provinces have operational and administrative flexibility. This could resolve current