

Oral Questions

● (1415)

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD*[English]***THE CONSTITUTION**

DETAILS OF CONVERSATIONS WITH BRITISH MINISTERS

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, my question is for the Secretary of State for External Affairs. When the minister met British ministers last November 10 did he say that if Canada was forced to choose, "his government would drop patriation rather than the charter?"

Hon. Mark MacGuigan (Secretary of State for External Affairs): Madam Speaker, on Tuesday afternoon the Prime Minister suggested the course of conduct which he would follow henceforth with respect to questioning of this kind. He asked us to observe the same rule, namely, that we would not henceforth discuss the details of our conversations or meetings with members of the British government. However, I would say that I stand by everything I have said in the House.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. MacGuigan: The whole course of conduct of the British government throughout these meetings shows that they are prepared to follow the undertaking which they have made, namely, to present, with their support, our resolution to the British Parliament.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, throughout this week and at other periods during this Parliament, we have suggested to the government that it would be better for them and better for Canada if they would tell the whole truth to the people of Canada about our Constitution instead of hiding facts from the people of this country.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, the Secretary of State for External Affairs has backed away from saying publicly what he may well have said privately, which is that the priority of his government is to have another country change our rights and keep our Constitution. He declines to say that publicly, although there is very good evidence that he has said it privately.

May I ask the Secretary of State for External Affairs whether, in that meeting on November 10, with British officials in Westminster, he said that the Government of Canada would seek to entrench a charter of rights, even if we were not seeking the patriation of our constitution?

Mr. MacGuigan: Madam Speaker, I stand by my previous answer. The Right Hon. Leader of the Opposition appears to have obtained, in some manner or other, all of the documentation in this matter. If he wants it made public, he may make it public.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, the minister has now given his view that the documents on which I am basing my questions are documents which are official and do reflect the facts. That is the clear implication of what he has just said.

Let me ask the Secretary of State for External Affairs this: is it the policy of the Government of Canada, given a choice, that it would prefer having the entrenchment of the charter of rights to having our Constitution home? Is that the policy of the Government of Canada?

Mr. MacGuigan: Madam Speaker, I am not sure that question in those terms ought to be addressed to me. But I can say that I know of no discussions in cabinet on that point.

Mr. Lawrence: What do you discuss in cabinet?

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, my supplementary question is also for the Secretary of State for External Affairs. Why will the Government of Canada not tell the Parliament of Canada what representations were made on behalf of Canada?

Mr. MacGuigan: Madam Speaker, the government, through its government spokesman, has told Parliament and the country the substance of the whole course of dealings between our two governments. All that matters to this debate is on the public record. The opposition is trying to concentrate on details which are entirely out of context with the entire course of dealings.

There is simply no question, nor could there be a question, about the obligation of the British government in this matter, nor about the position which the Canadian Government is taking.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

INQUIRY WHETHER CONDITIONS WERE STIPULATED BY BRITISH GOVERNMENT

Hon. Jake Epp (Provencher): Madam Speaker, I would like to direct my question to the Secretary of State for External Affairs. I want to relay to the minister that if it is details we are talking about, we are seeing whether those details are the truth as the minister is giving them.

Can the minister tell the House whether on November 10, 1980, he was told by Westminster that Westminster could not have Canadian constitutional proposals if those proposals were being challenged in the Supreme Court of Canada?

● (1420)

Hon. Mark MacGuigan (Secretary of State for External Affairs): Madam Speaker, the position which the British government has taken is to respect the principle and their obligations; it is to raise questions about the manner of implementation, particularly with respect to timing. Matters which were raised in all of the discussions, which the opposition would like to see as negative elements, were always in the long