

*British North America Act*

economy and institution by proving that it can work to fulfil their needs and aspirations, and not just those of some other group or region. This task we face is of direct relevance to the constitutional process, because when a nation faces a challenge of such proportions as to overshadow any other before it, then that task requires a focus or a clear and unequivocal statement of purpose unlike any other. That focus, I believe, is our constitutions.

The second equally compelling reason for adopting the motion at this time lies in the current state of the constitutional review process. Patriation and an amending formula may be on the horizon, but without detracting from the powerful symbolic import of these events, they will not alleviate the backlog of dissatisfaction over inappropriate divisions of power, murky areas of responsibility, insufficient guarantees of individual and collective rights, etc. Although the Prime Minister appears to have discovered a renewed interest in the process of bringing our constitutional arrangements in line with modern realities, it is difficult not to conclude that little apparent progress has resulted.

The common ground on which to base the process of dialogue has not yet been found. Further, a basic agreement on the nature of that process will not be reached so long as the 11 governments involved have no shared perception of what they want out of the constitutional process. There is even a certain sense of futility to discussion about the "hows" of constitutional arrangements—division of powers, and so forth—without first achieving some consensus of the "whys": Why Canada? Why government? Why a federal system?

Only when there exists reasonable consensus on what this nation is about, and what the basic purpose of our governments should be, should we proceed to work out the mechanical arrangements of which level can best do which tasks. It is noteworthy that the British North America Act itself offers no sense of purpose about the nation it brought into being. "Peace, order and good government" is as close as it comes to defining such a purpose—but to what end? It is silent on that critical question.

Our present constitution reads like a contract for "business as usual", albeit under a different roof. It is totally preoccupied, apart from settling certain debts and liabilities with the form and practice of our government institutions—not with shedding light on the nature of their "business". We can only assume that the structures created by the BNA Act reflected the goals of a self-assured class which is a ridiculous perspective in a modern-day constitution. We are too pluralistic and, what is more important still, too conscious of that pluralism to permit the luxury of unquestioned assumptions about our nationhood.

I would not underestimate the difficulty of finding agreement on our objectives as a nation. There is a pressing need for at least one common point of agreement, shared by all 11 governments, if the process is to succeed. I submit that the commitment to equality of opportunity, to the eradication of disparity, is such a common point of agreement.

[Mr. MacDonald (Egmont).]

The substantive wording of this motion has, in fact, already been agreed to unanimously by the 11 participants at the Victoria constitutional conference in 1971. It represents a statement of purpose for confederation with universal acceptance by each federal and provincial participant in the constitutional dialogue, which meshes well both with our values and with the historical concerns of our federal government. To give a sampling of the breadth of agreement on this national purpose, I quote from presentations made by participants at the constitutional conferences of 1968 through 1970. The then premier of British Columbia, W. A. C. Bennett, said in 1969:

We hold it to be the right of Canadians in every region to have a standard of living equal to the national average.

The premier of Alberta, Harry Strom, said in the same year:

Our view is that we could and should find much more far reaching solutions to the question of inequality in the distribution of wealth in Canada.

The premier of Ontario, in 1969, John Robarts, said:

There is a national need to rectify economic disparity . . . There must be some meaning to being a Canadian regardless of where you live, regardless of the economic circumstances of the particular area in which you live.

In Quebec, in 1968, premier Jean-Jacques Bertrand said:

Economic disparity between the country's various regions is one of the two critical Canadian problems of the day.

It is true today, if not more so, than at the time he uttered those words. Later, in 1970, former Premier Bourassa said:

• (1710)

It is clear—that this question—

Meaning economic disparity

—should be given special mention in the text of the country's constitution.

Premier Smith of Nova Scotia said, in 1969:

It is of fundamental importance that the constitution provide for balanced regional economic development.

Premier Smallwood of Newfoundland said, in 1968:

The constitution should give recognition to the existence of serious regional disparities throughout Canada . . . and shall declare the need to eliminate such disparities.

The report of the June, 1969, working session spoke of "placing a moral obligation upon governments to take measures to combat regional disparities", and, significantly, the report went on to note that "no arguments were raised against this kind of obligation." Finally, the conclusion from the third meeting of December, 1969, was:

The conference reiterated the earlier agreement that the objective of reducing disparities across the country should be written into the preamble of a revised constitution as a basic goal of the Canadian people.

I suggest that what we have before us represents a clear, unequivocal agreement on a most basic purpose of government and of confederation. It is an opportunity for leadership that we in parliament should not let slip; that is, to give expression to such rare constitutional consensus among our 11 governments and at the same time to initiate the most significant attack on disparity ever undertaken by this nation. Some would argue that this type of amendment should not be introduced alone; that either it should be part of a comprehen-