

So, Mr. Speaker, since 1927 there have been ten attempts to achieve patriation and an amending formula. Two have been on provincial initiatives, in 1931 and 1968; there have been 21 meetings of first ministers on the constitution; 43 meetings of ministers; a minimum of 17 meetings of officials alone to discuss patriation and an amending formula, and a host of other informal meetings throughout that period.

Looking at this 50 years of attempts, one is tempted to paraphrase Shaw's St. Joan—"How long, how long, O Lord, how long before Heaven is prepared to receive thy saint?"

This long history of attempts and, I think, the frustration of that process, were brought home clearly to the people of Canada by the televised proceedings earlier this year, and this history of frustrated attempts to reach agreements, I think, has some simple explanation. Partially, it reflects the divergent views on what the nature of Canada is, but also it reflects tactical considerations. I do not say this out of any disrespect for provincial governments. One expects that when the provincial governments encounter the federal government there will be hard bargaining. Clearly, in a situation where one argues, with credibility, that there had to be unanimous approval of the provinces for change, every province had an incentive to hold out for some accommodation of its specific and unique view. Every province, in a sense, would feel under that kind of tradition, that it was a hammer-lock for twisting out yet more concessions from the federal government. Clearly, in those circumstances, it is extremely difficult to bring the eleven governments together in agreement.

What we have proposed now, by removing that hammer-lock of the necessity of unanimous consent, will place the continuing negotiations of the provinces and the federal government on a much sounder, more equitable basis of discussion and negotiation.

This long, sad and, in some ways, almost tragic history of attempts to meet the needs of constitutional reform, we have to add new elements which are clear to most of us. They were certainly clear to us last spring when we were considering the effect of the referendum debate in Quebec, that is, the urgency of the situation we face flowing from the referendum debate and the decision made by the people of Quebec at that time.

Not only did federal politicians on both sides of the House go to Quebec at that time to say they were prepared to undertake significant and thorough changes to the constitution but, I believe, each of the provincial premiers outside Quebec made the same kind of commitment. With the successful resolution of the Quebec referendum debate, we on this side of the House and, I believe, hon. members opposite as well, accepted the urgency and the need to respond—the need to fulfil the commitments which had been made to Quebecers at that time.

I regret to say that after the summer's discussions with provincial governments, and as the summer wore on, the sense of urgency and priority which had animated discussion, began to disappear from the point of view expressed by the provinces.

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To us on this side of the House, however, that urgency is still there. It may be that within the next few days the people of Quebec, through a general election in Quebec or whatever, will again be asked to comment and reflect upon and express again the decision they made last spring. We believe on this side of the House that it is urgent, and that we have a sound commitment to the people of Quebec to provide them with the kind of significant change that we believe they wish to have.

An hon. Member: What about other provinces?

Mr. Roberts: The hon. member asks about other provinces. I shall return to that in just a moment.

● (1630)

There is one other aspect which leads me to believe that we must act now. Clearly if we are to act now it cannot be with the kind of unanimity that I believe the Leader of the Opposition has suggested we should have. It is because there is—at least I believe it to be so—a sense of impatience and urgency throughout the country, not simply on the part of Quebecers but throughout the country, that we deal with and solve these questions. There has come into the Canadian consciousness a sense that the time really has come to decide whether Canada is to be simply in a sense the sum of its parts, cumulative regions of the country, or whether there is a society based on a strong national economy and a strong national government which is much more above and beyond the parts of the country.

In relation to that question I would like to cite at some length—I hope not at too great length—some of the comments made by one of Canada's most distinguished historians, Professor Arthur Lower, before this debate began and before the resolution was presented to the public and the Parliament, but after the conclusion of the last federal-provincial conference. I think he expresses in his words the kind of concern which I have just tried to express, that sense of impatience that the governments of Canada and the people of Canada resolve their views on the fundamental nature of this country. I cite from an open letter which I believe is addressed to the *Ottawa Citizen*. In it he is referring to the federal-provincial conference. He says:

It seems obvious that agreement will never be reached between the federal government and ten demanding provinces. Future conferences will probably find more disagreement than this last one. The cause lies in the very nature of things, for there will always be at least one province out of line. It is hardly the same as a jury trial; you cannot keep provincial premiers locked up until they come to an agreement. One could probe deeper still, for the ultimate cause lies in the dilemma we face over the nature of Canada.

He then goes on to draw some parallels with the situation in the early years of the United States when he describes the United States as having dodged the question of sovereignty for three-quarters of a century. He then says this:

It seems to me that the point for Canada is quite clear. No more than the Americans shall we be able to go on with the question of sovereignty completely unsettled. The way out that we have tried is of course federalist, but surely federalism assumes that the last word lies somewhere. The recent conference has shown that we are trying to tell ourselves that it lies nowhere, that a country can