

Some people who came before the committee talked about that sense of disenchantment. They told us they had fought hard within their own towns, villages, neighbourhoods and within their own families and had hung on to the promise of a previous Prime Minister and a previous Government that there would be a renewed federalism.

That is why the first point to make with respect to the Accord's impact is to understand that without it we would be in great trouble and increasingly that trouble would grow and grow.

Does the Accord strengthen or weaken Canada? Let me say at the outset that in my judgment it strengthens Canada. Considerable debate by many groups as to whether or not there has been a strengthening or a weakening as a consequence of the Accord has taken place but part of it depends on one's perspective of what this country actually is. Many good people came before the committee offering their views as to whether Canada is strengthened or weakened by the Meech Lake Accord. Let me offer the views of two. Mr. Gordon Robertson, former Clerk of the Privy Council, came before the committee and said—

[*Translation*]

Another question is whether the agreement weakens the federal government in any significant and important way. Here one has to note that the accord does not change the distribution of powers in any way; nothing is changed in Sections 91, 92 and 93.

During the constitutional negotiations in 1968 to 1971 and later up to 1979, it was fully expected that there would be changes in the distribution of powers. Quebec sought a number of changes in the distribution of powers. This accord does not change that distribution in any way.

• (1250)

[*English*]

Indeed, it is important to note that because Sections 91, 92 and 93 provide the fundamental divisions of power in Canada and, as a consequence, as Mr. Robertson pointed out, the Accord does not affect the powers in Sections 91, 92 and 93.

Eric Kierans spoke on the matter. You may recall, Madam Speaker, that he was a Liberal cabinet Minister, an economist and former president of the Montreal Stock Exchange. I thought he offered considerable wisdom when he talked about the Accord in light of the original spirit of 1867. He said:

Meech Lake is not new. It is simply the closest thing we have come to following the original intent and meaning of the British North America Act since Confederation itself. It reflects more accurately the view of what the original Fathers of Confederation thought they were agreeing to in a Confederation. They lived with each other, quarrelled and wrangled in debates, assemblies and conferences for years. They knew what was possible and what the different colonies would accept. They never intended that the provinces should be as dependent as they, in fact became. Above all else, they knew that a centralized Canada would not work.

I know that all of us want Canada to be strong, but some people confuse a powerful central Government with a strong Canada. That has not been my experience, and I do not think it has been the historical experience of this country. If we do not have strong sides, we cannot have a strong centre. If there are not strong regions, there will not be a strong country.

*Constitution Amendment, 1987*

The key thing to understand about the Meech Lake Accord, as Mr. Kierans points out, is the re-establishment of a balance in Canada, a balance that says that all provinces and all regions, along with the federal Government, make up the strength of this country. That is why, when I ask if the Accord has maintained a strong Canada, I have no doubt that it has maintained a strong Canada.

I want to deal in the remainder of my time with those groups that came forward to deal with another impact of the Meech Lake Accord. They were concerned about the impact of the Accord on their particular situation as members of the Canadian constitutional family. I am referring particularly to aboriginal people and those groups concerned with multiculturalism.

Let me make a general point. I said to those people, some of whom I have known for many years, that anything that contributes to the understanding of the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity contributes to the goals of those people who see Canada as contributing to their diversity. Aboriginal people, people concerned with multiculturalism and any group of people who depend on the concept of diversity should support the Meech Lake Accord because the Meech Lake Accord is the historic, the current and the future understanding of Quebec's role in Canada which speaks first to the tolerance required with respect to differences of culture and language. I think that aboriginal people would understand that first of all.

Those of us who participated in the constitutional debate involving aboriginal people in 1985 well remember the impact of Quebec's absence. We well remember the importance of Quebec to those talks and, indeed, the absence of Quebec helped contribute to the lack of success.

Mary Simon, a Quebec Inuit leader and past president of the National Committee on Inuit Issues, spoke eloquently on that matter. She said that it was important to understand that constitutional amendment would not benefit aboriginal peoples of Quebec as long as Quebec was not part of the Constitution. It was difficult, she said, to achieve enough provincial support to meet the requirements of the amending formula, seven provinces and half the population.

She, along with Robert Stanfield and many professors, came before the committee to outline the importance to the aboriginal communities that they be involved in a process of constitutional change, and this Government has always supported that. Now that Quebec is part of the constitutional family in a full way, aboriginal people will benefit as a consequence because they will have a constitutional process involving 10 provinces and not nine.

Finally, let me say that many members of multicultural groups came forward. Multiculturalism is the oldest reality in Canada. It gained constitutional recognition in 1982 with Section 27. Section 27 says that this Charter, the law of the land, will be interpreted in a manner consistent with the enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians. In