

Speech From the Throne

The challenges mentioned today in the speech from the Throne are certainly not new to the riding of Saint-Maurice.

The first challenge, that of national unity, takes me back to the 1980 referendum campaign in Quebec. In Shawinigan, the referendum on Quebec separation was a very painful experience. At the time, the debate became so heated, Mr. Speaker, that some families were split forever. Lasting friendships disappeared as a result of a single political debate. I personally lost friends because of this referendum. It left scars that have yet to heal today, after eleven years.

We must learn from history. On the basis of my own modest experience in 1980 in Quebec, I feel I must urge this House today to do everything it possibly can to avoid exposing Quebecers and Canadians a second time to a needlessly cruel exercise.

Another challenge mentioned in the Speech from the Throne, the challenge of prosperity and economic effectiveness, is one that the people of my riding will appreciate.

During the past thirty years, I have seen my riding lose its industrial base, experience an economic slump, seen its youth leave for more prosperous urban centres, inherit serious environmental problems, including the rapidly escalating pollution of the Saint-Maurice River, and there is also the phenomenon of a rapidly aging population.

I am convinced that the measures undertaken and proposed by this government will help rebuild the economy and correct the mistakes made during the sixties and the seventies.

• (1720)

First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, we must find a solution to this existential crisis which has too many Canadians believing we can no longer live together.

In the Speech from the Throne, the Government set forth a number of important challenges and spelled out how it plans to respond to this time of decision.

All of us here today have a fiduciary responsibility to safeguard and build upon what has been entrusted to us by past generations.

Members of this House have very heavy responsibilities. As far as I know, Mr. Speaker, no member of this

House was elected by his or her constituents to specifically work towards the destruction of Canada.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Pronovost: Quite the contrary, Mr. Speaker. Canadians expect each and every member, with absolutely no exception, to help find real solutions to improve the situation in our country.

No one in this House was elected to sell off Canada. To make Canada work would benefit Quebecers as all the other Canadians. If our country is to become more efficient once again, members of this House will have to find positive solutions during the present debate.

A constitution should mirror the nation. Unfortunately too many people look in that mirror and do not see themselves. This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. The fact that there may be some cracks in the edifice of Confederation is not enough reason to forsake Canada and all it means.

When we look past the sometimes harsh criticism and strong emotions, we can see that Canadians understand and appreciate that we have so much. We, as a people, dare not risk shattering it all, because of our emotions and some grievance.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Pronovost: Mr. Speaker, as noted in the Speech from the Throne, the government's work will be guided by certain key principles: seeking changes to improve Canada; achieving change through compromise and accommodation; affirming Quebec's unique characteristics, as well as the interests of all Canadians, wherever they live; making fairness, effectiveness, efficiency and the protection of all Canadians' rights the tests of constitutional reform.

But institutions can only do so much. Without the commitment of the members of this House and of every citizen, they are only fine intentions. Trust and generosity, fairness and tolerance, these come from within the hearts of men and women of goodwill.

[*English*]

We must also assist Canadians to better appreciate their history and tradition, and that undertaking is given in the Throne Speech.