

*The Constitution*

That is why I am a strong federalist. That is why we need a strong national presence throughout our country. However, a strong national presence does not mean, in my view, a highly centralized, over-bearing bureaucracy with a heavy hand on virtually every provincial activity. Far from it. For our new federation to work, there must be specific provincial jurisdictions, shared powers, and federal paramountcy in key areas of an overriding national purpose. This, to me, is co-operative federalism. And, Mr. Speaker, I suggest that the proposed resolution provides for that kind of co-operative federalism.

Last October, the New Democratic Party caucus was prepared to support in principle the resolution on constitutional change presented by the Government of Canada. We did so because, first, in our judgment, action was needed at this important historical time in our country and, second, because key elements in the proposed resolution were part of established New Democratic Party policy.

We include among these a Bill of Rights, the recognition of the duality of Canada, especially its two principal linguistic groups, and third, entrenchment of the important principle of equalization which is central to a social democratic party. In addition, it provided for, at long last, our own Canadian constitution with a workable amending formula.

Therefore, in supporting this resolution I am supporting my own party's constitutional policy as passed at conventions by the members of my party from all areas of Canada. However, Mr. Speaker, last October we found some glaring weaknesses in the Liberal proposals in the original document. We were not satisfied with many aspects of the charter of rights, equalization, native and women's rights, and the exclusion of rights for the handicapped.

Consequently, my party said that we would support the resolution in principle only if two important conditions were met: that regional and federal balance was restored to the federal system: that is to say, in this particular case that provincial control of non-renewable natural resources be firmly established in the Constitution; and second, that a number of specific improvements were made in the resolution apart from this, particularly in the Charter of Rights. In a letter to the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), my leader singled out as examples of these specific improvements the strengthening of the provision as it affected equality for women, the strengthening of the position of the native peoples of Canada, along with significant changes to the amending formula.

● (1650)

As a result of constructive negotiation with the government, my party was able to achieve three important concessions from the government. First, affirmation of provincial ownership and control of resources. Second, the provinces, for the first time, will have the right to levy indirect taxes on their resources. Third, the provinces will have the constitutional right to participate in interprovincial trade.

Many have condemned those of us who support the Constitution because of the seemingly arbitrary way in which the process has evolved. To some extent, I agree. The government

has at times attempted to push and ram its way through. The Prime Minister has a personal timetable to which we objected. We strongly opposed closure at first reading. We demanded the committee proceedings be televised so the people of Canada could be as close as possible to those proceedings and deliberations. And we vigorously fought to extend the committee's hearings so that all groups of citizens who so desired would have the opportunity to present their briefs.

But the process has not been negative and in vain. Quite the opposite is true, Mr. Speaker. With very effective fighting both in public and in private, the NDP has been able to achieve positive changes in the original reduction. Among these I include the entrenchment of treaty and aboriginal rights for our native people; and, second, an important change in the provision respecting women in Canada. We now have provided in the Charter that women will be guaranteed not only equality before the law but under the law. Third, the amending process has been changed to make it clear that a referendum can be used only as a deadlock-breaking mechanism.

In addition, there were a number of other changes that members of my caucus fought vigorously to obtain and were indeed obtained. I include the handicapped people of Canada, the recognition of the multicultural dimension of our society and a general toughening up on the Charter of Rights.

As a result of these changes and improvements in the resolution which are quite substantial, an overwhelming majority of our caucus decided to support the constitutional resolution. However, in saying this I want to stress two important points concerning the future disposition of the resolution. We have argued that nothing objectionable be added to the resolution and that there must be a full and fair debate of the resolution in the House of Commons. These final objections have more or less been achieved.

However, I would like to add at this point that the main reason, in my judgment, that there may not have been full and fair debate is that for approximately six weeks this chamber was hung up on one amendment. That amendment was not a government amendment, it was an amendment put forward by the official opposition, the Conservative party. Consequently, if anybody is to be blamed for denying full and fair debate in this chamber, I accuse my friends to the right and not the government.

There are still some members who would argue that one last attempt be made to gain a consensus of the provincial premiers to give the resolution a broader acceptance. In other words, some land of national consensus. I would not be opposed to this last minute attempt if I were not completely convinced that such an exercise would be futile. Most of our present and former provincial first ministers have exhibited, over many years of negotiations and deliberations, an inordinate capacity for parochial and regional preoccupation. No doubt most of this "me first" approach is due largely to local political myopia. A great deal of it also emanates from widespread distrust of the Prime Minister. But I do not know why those premiers should allow their personal distrust of the Prime