

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL CONFERENCE

SUGGESTED ATTENDANCE OF LEADERS OF OPPOSITION PARTIES AS OBSERVERS AT JUNE MEETINGS

Hon. Robert L. Stanfield (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I would like to address a question to the Acting Prime Minister with regard to attendance as observers at the forthcoming federal-provincial conference in Victoria. Is the government considering inviting myself and the leaders of the other opposition parties to attend the sessions, both closed and open, as observers—

Mr. Guay (St. Boniface): What will you contribute?

An hon. Member: A hell of a lot more than you.

Mr. Stanfield:—departing from the policy the government has followed in the past in this regard?

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (Acting Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I understand it is the intention of the government to arrange for some observers to be with the federal delegation. I would question, however, whether the meetings would be closed, in the sense in which the provinces would wish, far less the federal government, if observers were to be present during the closed sessions, and so I think the answer I must give must be in the negative on that part of the question.

Mr. Stanfield: As a supplementary question—

Mr. Guay (St. Boniface): Any suggestions?

Mr. Stanfield: Mr. Speaker, we seem to be getting a certain amount of static from the other side. I am sure the Acting Prime Minister will agree with me that constitutional reform is not the private preserve of the government of Canada. I would therefore ask the Acting Prime Minister, in view of the importance of this meeting and in view of the fact that the government may very well need at least the understanding of as broad a cross-section of Canadians as possible with regard to its constitutional proposals, whether the government will not reconsider its decision to exclude the leaders of the opposition parties as observers from closed consultations? Will the government not reconsider this decision in view of the crucial stage these discussions have reached, and in view of the obvious importance of having as widespread understanding as possible in the various parties with regard to the government's proposals?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, it is quite clear from the way in which the government has made its proposals known to the public as well as to Members of Parliament, and in light of the activities of the parliamentary committee which is now touring the country, that the government wants as much understanding as possible of the nature of these constitutional issues. So I do not think the government lies open to that particular charge. When it comes to the negotiations, before proposals are placed before our respective parliaments and the people I do believe it may be useful—and I think the Leader of the Opposition

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having been the head of a government himself understand this—and that on occasions it is well to have private conversations.

Mr. Stanfield: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the Acting Prime Minister why the government of Canada finds it necessary to take a narrower attitude toward the make-up of its delegation than have several provinces in the past, including the province of Nova Scotia, and whether he can justify in any way the exclusion of representatives of the opposition parties?

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. That question is argumentative. The hon. member for Greenwood on a supplementary question.

REPRESENTATION OF MUNICIPALITIES AT JUNE MEETINGS

Mr. Andrew Brewin (Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, I should like to ask the Acting Prime Minister if consideration is being given to the representation of municipalities as observers or otherwise inasmuch as the constitutional committee has had many representations of this kind and the Federation of Mayors and Municipalities has also urged that the municipalities are concerned about the future constitution of Canada and should be represented at important discussions?

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (Acting Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, that would certainly be a decision for the provincial governments. Perhaps, as the hon. Leader of the Opposition has said, provincial governments may be willing to add municipal representatives as members of their delegations rather than just as observers. We would have no objection to this, but some provinces may feel that they can make greater progress in these negotiations if the delegations are not too large.

[Translation]

INVITATION TO JOINT COMMITTEE ON CONSTITUTION TO ATTEND MEETINGS

Mr. Gérard Laprise (Abitibi): Mr. Speaker, I would like to direct a supplementary question to the Acting Prime Minister.

Will the Joint Committee on the Constitution, which has travelled throughout Canada to hear the views of the people about the constitution, be invited to attend the forthcoming federal-provincial conference in Victoria, this June?

[English]

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (Acting Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I think this illustrates the problem facing the government. I can understand that some members of the House might have a greater reason to be present during these negotiations than others, but one then opens the question of why all Members of Parliament and all members of provincial legislatures should not be invited. As to the particular question, the committee of Parliament which has been touring the country is free to make a report either in advance of or after the June meetings.