

The Constitution

In the final analysis, if Quebec really wants to be independent, to establish its own nationhood, in the end that really is for it to decide. Sooner or later Quebec must have its rendezvous with independence. I think it is simply a mark of respect for that choice to permit Quebec to make that decision without English Canada essentially wringing its hands over the fact.

In concluding, if Quebecers want to stand at the brink to get a good look at the economic consequences of independence, I suggest they may well decide to re-examine that possibility. The protection of their language and culture is better assured within Canada than without.

Mr. Al Johnson (Calgary North): Mr. Speaker, this is one of the most important opportunities for me to speak in this House. It is not only because I am speaking on a critical issue, the Constitution, but because it is an opportunity for me to convey to this House directly the recommendations, the concerns, and the aspirations of my constituents regarding this country and its Constitution.

Over the past couple of months I have held three town hall meetings. I have held small home-style group discussions with constituents. I have spoken to constituents individually, and I have done a survey to which more than 1,500 of my constituents responded on issues related to constitutional renewal.

My constituents have often expressed their frustration and anger, but they have been frank, determined and hopeful as they have contributed to the national discussion. I might add that a constituent of mine, Mr. Wilfrid Posehn, attended all of my three town hall meetings and I am pleased that he has made his own, unbiased report to the special joint committee on a renewed Canada. Mr. Posehn is to be congratulated, and I also thank him for the interest that he has shown in this subject and in our country.

I should begin by saying that for most of my constituents the priority issue at this time is that of the economy. They want economic security and jobs that will allow them to be full participants in Canadian society. The Constitution is for most of them a secondary issue. However, there is a grudging understanding of the connection between the stability of this nation and its economic well-being. Consequently, they acknowledge the Constitution must be at the top of our list of priorities.

There is a strong feeling in my constituency that Canadian identity is a real issue in the present constitutional discussions. A sense of identity is crucial if we are

to be a fulfilled and prosperous nation. For people in Calgary North, Quebec is very much a part of this national identity. Frustration, however, exists over the concept of distinct society. There is general acceptance that Quebec is distinct and should be considered so on the condition that it does not mean that Quebec is given special privileges that are not granted to others. The general sense is that Quebec has its distinctiveness but Alberta has its distinctiveness too. My constituents believe that Quebec should be given the opportunity to live according to its culture but—and this is the key—this should not mean additional powers. All provinces are distinct and obviously Quebec is most distinct. My constituents are frustrated at the thought that granting Quebec its distinctiveness might mean that it has greater powers at the expense of other provinces. My constituents believe that the principles of fairness and equality should be our guide in renewing our Constitution.

As I mentioned earlier, I conducted a survey of my constituents and was pleased to receive over 1,500 responses. A good part of this survey dealt with the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments. I asked my constituents their views on who should provide social services in general and who should provide particular services, such as pensions and medicare.

My Calgary North constituents were fairly evenly divided on social issues generally, considering for the most part that they should be provided through shared jurisdictions. This applied to medicare. However, 75 per cent of them felt that pensions should be federally administered. Only 15 per cent saw medicare as a totally provincial responsibility and 22 per cent thought it should be an exclusive federal jurisdiction.

Immigration is an area in which a number of people expressed strong views. Some 70 per cent of respondents feel that there should be strong federal control in this area.

One of the most difficult areas that my questionnaire touched on was that of aboriginal rights. From the questionnaire, from written comments and from my public meetings it is clear that my constituents want this issue resolved fairly and justly. Most, some 85 per cent, believe that the aboriginal people should have some form of sovereignty or nationhood within Canada, be it in the form of municipal-like government or at the level of provinces or even more. This having been said, there is also an overwhelming sense that we must make a settlement and get on living together as equal citizens. My constituents want the aboriginal people to be full participants in Canadian society. They do not want them