

Housing

emphasized in several places that it is impossible for the federal government to do anything unless—I am not quoting him, but this is what it meant to me—it has the unanimous consent of all the provinces in Canada. This is what the Prime Minister implied by his words.

If that were true, we would not have unemployment insurance in Canada; we would not have hospital insurance in Canada, there would not be a medicare plan on the statute books of Canada; there would be no Canada Assistance Plan; there would be no old age pensions in Canada. This is the fear we have. This is what we are talking about. We are saying to the Prime Minister that the constitutional strait-jacket in which he has put himself, this attitude that the division of powers in the British North America Act means that you must not step over the line even though you may do it constitutionally—no one is suggesting it be done unconstitutionally—immobilizes the federal government, immobilizes this parliament and renders Canada weak.

The kind of federal government for which the Prime Minister stands—I said this a year ago; my party said it a year ago—is a weak central government which merely presides over conferences and meetings. It passes some laws if it gets the unanimous consent of the provinces, but takes little initiative; says “please”, “maybe” from time to time, and if the provinces frown, runs away. That is not leadership in this country on the issues that require leadership. In the whole discussion by the Prime Minister of the constitution he is constantly speaking in legalistic terms about the division of powers. I have never heard him talk about the responsibilities of the various legislatures. I, who am a federalist, who believe in Canadian federalism, who believe that Canada cannot possibly be a unitary state, that it is stupid to talk of one, say without any qualification or hesitation that this parliament is nothing if it is not the expression of the needs and the will of all the Canadian people. The federal government is nothing if it does not accept the authority and power to act for all the Canadian people.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Lewis: That means precisely, to use the Prime Minister's words, that when a local problem has by the passage of time become a national problem, it becomes the responsibility of the federal parliament and the federal government to act. Since housing, pollution,

urban transportation and all the total complex of urban life in Canada are now national problems, it has become the duty and responsibility of this government and this parliament to act on them.

Mr. Winch: For the general good of Canada.

Mr. Lewis: Yes, for the general good of Canada. No one suggests that the federal government take action on housing without consultation with the provinces. No one in this house or outside this house who knows anything about the subject is that stupid. No one suggests that the federal government have a program that is not arrived at after constant consultation with the provinces. I remember suggesting a year ago at a meeting of the New Democratic party where a colleague of mine, Mr. Douglas Fisher, was nominated for the last election, that there ought to be a permanent secretariat, as I called it, or a permanent national urban council, as we have since called it, on which there would be representatives of federal, provincial and municipal governments. In this way there would be constant and continuing co-ordination of plans and programs, not only in the making of them but in their implementation.

● (4:00 p.m.)

No one is suggesting that the provinces should not be consulted. No one is suggesting that the federal government go over the heads of the provinces. What we are saying is that the federal government must take the initiative to start solving national problems. Some of them it must solve because it is the duty of this parliament to act, whether or not all the provinces agree, and some of them it must solve when most of the provinces agree and one or two provinces decide to stay out. That is what we are saying in the New Democratic party.

The Prime Minister's fallacy is that he always speaks about this legalistic division of powers and never about the responsibility of the federal parliament and the federal government. It would be impossible for the Prime Minister to persuade me, or even to persuade a member of the Liberal party, that the Minister of Transport resigned from the government because housing in Canada was doing so well that his efforts were no longer needed in this position. No one can persuade me or anyone else in the house that the resignation of a man from such an important office, of a man who held the office of Acting