

*The Constitution*

When we describe the charter of rights in this resolution, we are talking about fundamental freedoms. We are telling all of our governments, in city halls, in provincial legislatures and in this Parliament, that there are boundaries beyond which governments cannot go. We are saying that governments, not individual people, are limited. The charter we want must apply everywhere, not just in a few places with those who happen to find agreement convenient.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Fisher:** We need to keep our principles straight. We need to go back to our bedrock; our freedoms are too easily threatened. Protection is needed. That is why our charter is not going to be checkerboarded across Canada; our rights cannot be checkerboarded. Canadians, not just some Canadians, not just a few Canadians, all Canadians, enjoy the same rights.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we have a responsibility to act now. We also have the authority to act. We have heard a lot of rhetoric uttered about the process that we have used and about its effect on our goals. Some people have argued that we must have much greater support from the provinces for our actions. They seem to feel that the provinces are our equals, or that they are somehow even greater in importance than the federal government. They claim that our initiatives, our process, will tear confederation apart. I believe the opposite. I believe that we must act now. Our actions on this resolution can only strengthen our country. The federal government must be more than just one extra voice among the different governments in Canada, especially on constitutional matters. Action on the Constitution is our obligation. The final decision belongs here, in the Parliament of Canada.

● (1610)

Of course, we do have a partnership in confederation. Our provinces do have independent and respected roles to play. They do touch parts of our lives that should not be affected by the central government. Their views, accordingly, must be heard in a fundamental debate such as this. When the provinces refuse to act, however, or when the partnership breaks down, then we must act ourselves.

We should see each government's role properly, not in some artificially inflated fashion. The provinces cannot extend their independence into a veto. They cannot demand that we turn our consultations, our interdependence, into the last word in the debate. Alone, or as a block, the provinces can give us valued insights. They cannot, however, simply add up all their jobs and all their claims and then conclude—as they have done—that the final word and the final decision is theirs. This Parliament must still receive more than provincial advice. We must take that advice. We must then add it in with other reactions and consider a wide variety of national pressures. We must use our own judgment and come up with our own answers.

In this debate, the provinces have been challenged to change federal actions by offering a better case. They have had plenty of opportunity to participate in the changes that are happen-

ing. Instead, they lost sight of the great national need and they pressed only for the sake of their local satisfactions. They saw the same marvellous opening to act as we did, to create change at long last, but they suggested only more delays as their alternatives. They have been given their chances over the past year, and over the past 50 years to improve our national life. Now, when we act and accept this opportunity, we are being called arrogant, insensitive and one-sided.

Well, we were elected, to all sides in this House, to take this responsibility and not to abdicate it or to assign it away to some poorly defined coalition, whether that coalition be a premier's group or a collection of private individuals. The job is ours to do. In fact, if we do not act, if we back away from the job, then we will be signalling a terminal weakness in the federal government. We will be seen as unwilling or unable to act and to lead the country. We need a strong central government in Canada. We need federal leadership.

I believe we have assumed our responsibilities and that we have acted very, very well. When federal leadership has been needed, we have provided it. Members from all political parties can point to some aspect of this Constitution with pride in their contributions. Contrary to our critics' views, this process has succeeded.

We have brought this discussion to the whole country. Through debates in this House and in the committee, constitutional change has become a truly national issue. There has not by any means been agreement, but everybody has had a full opportunity to be heard either here or in committee. Everybody has had a voice, and television has helped to take these voices to the public and to make them extra effective. Judging by my mail, opinions have become well informed and very firm. People who write or who stop to talk to me on this issue feel their views are worth expressing and that we are listening. I want to repeat, in conclusion, how pleased I am to be a part of this debate.

We are taking the first steps to give ourselves the proper tools for our government. We are bringing our Constitution to Canada, giving it the vital limits in the charter and making it possible to bring renewal in the future.

We have to start using this tool right away. At the beginning of my comments, I referred to the Quebec referendum as a great motivation and a great commitment to satisfy. I could, as easily, have added remarks about remote northern territories, about clashes between the resource and the consuming provinces, about disparities between the rich and the needy regions and about dissatisfactions and imbalances between populated and rural areas. We obviously have to go now to those people who have deep differences and deep grievances and start to repair our national unity.

We have taken these first steps and, in doing so, we have made the next, bigger steps easier ones to take. We know how change will happen. That clears away the debris and lets us focus on what change is best for all. We must shape our institutions and our governments to fit our new needs. In the past, we have been paralysed by our lack of proper tools. Now