

*The Constitution*

If we may set the charter aside for a while, Mr. Speaker, I think that the patriation of our Constitution, the enshrinement of our freedoms and rights, as well as the new amending formula are truly the first steps toward an in-depth reform. This reform is that which was promised to Quebecers by the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) himself on the eve of the referendum when he stated, and I quote:

I know that I can solemnly promise that, should the No-side win, we will set in motion forthwith the mechanisms required for renewing the Constitution, and that we will not stop until we have achieved this goal.

I am convinced that the Prime Minister was at the time relying on the good will which most premiers had expressed during the referendum campaign to carry out the necessary reform through federal-provincial conferences. I, for one, was expecting a lot from the consultations which the Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Social Development had undertaken last summer, as well as from the federal-provincial conference which was held last September. Instead of witnessing people involved in negotiations to achieve the goal of a renewed constitution, we saw our first ministers discuss the power-sharing issue first, apparently neither too anxious nor concerned about the patriation of our Constitution and the inclusion of a human rights charter.

After something like ten such conferences in 54 years, I find that the Constitution has not moved an inch, because there have only been minor changes brought about and it is still locked-up in London. How then can we fulfil that promise to provide Canadians with a modern constitution attuned to the Canadian reality at the dawn of the twenty-first century? On the one hand, Mr. Speaker, from the very moment when the Government of Canada brought forth its proposed resolution, a strong opposition front has accused Ottawa of acting unilaterally, without the support of the provinces or of the population. Some people are wondering whether the action taken by the government is wise or legal.

By means of a vast offensive of advertised propaganda, the Quebec government is fostering confusion stating that Ottawa should come back to the table, negotiate and come to an agreement because "we are not to be fooled" as the slogan goes; also there are editors, columnists and intellectuals who call the federal Liberal Members of Parliament from Quebec sheep, traitors and voiceless. From their pulpit, Mr. Speaker, those high priests of the day even go as far as urging our members to ignore party line and to vote according to their conscience.

To hear them, Mr. Speaker, one would think that the proposed resolution means an end to the present federal system, that it comes to us overnight without notice and without consultation. Such is not the case, Mr. Speaker. Throughout last summer, the provinces were consulted; the Quebec caucus and the national caucus met several times to make sure that the proposals of the government and the

provinces would meet with the approval of all hon. members, and among others, the Quebec Liberal members.

At that time, I witnessed the good will of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice in starting negotiations with the provincial premiers. There was no end to their efforts in making sure that at no point would hon. members on this side of the House be unable to support them. One thing is sure, much more was expected from the first ministers' constitutional conference of last September. I was disappointed, like some of my colleagues, to see that after so many hours of negotiations, the participants had failed to agree on a formula to amend the Constitution once patriated. I admit that more flexibility would have been desirable on the part of both the Canadian government and the provinces in order to achieve real agreement between the parties. But that conference having failed, are we to sit on our hands and just wait for another constitutional conference, or should we not, instead, accept the project through which the Canadian people can have a truly Canadian constitution, not in 54 years but much sooner, a project that bypasses the principle of unanimity which has caused first ministers' conferences to end in deadlock for some 40 years, Mr. Speaker?

[English]

Some people have asked me how a member who has a reputation for taking a more peaceful approach to negotiation based on consensus and not on confrontation, one who is known to some of his colleagues on the other side as a dove, can support this resolution. Sure, I will identify myself as a dove; sure, I do not like the situation we are in now; sure, I would rather we arrived at a negotiated deal, but we did try and we did not succeed. We now have a choice. We admit a partial failure in arriving at unanimity and take a chance on going back to the negotiating table with partners who cannot seem to agree among themselves and risk losing the progress we made, or we can support the resolution. I stand for supporting the resolution. It is an important step forward and a first step in obtaining the goal we all search for, and that is, constitutional change. If we give up now we are doomed to failure, and failure after 55 years of effort only favours support of the status quo. I am not one who supports the status quo, Mr. Speaker.

As a Quebecer who participated actively in the referendum I will not accept this resolution as the only change promised during that referendum. This is but one step. It will be our duty as members of the government caucus to assure ourselves that the constitutional changes continue to occur and that they occur with the full participation of members of this House.

The performance of the parliamentarians on the joint committee is proof that we should not leave constitutional changes to 11 premiers and their civil servants.