

DOMINION-PROVINCIAL RELATIONS

SHARED-COST PROGRAMS—CONSULTATION
WITH PROVINCES BEFORE WITHDRAWAL

Hon. Robert L. Stanfield (Leader of the Opposition): A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, with regard to the federal-provincial conference. I ask the question for greater clarification. In view of the representations made by the premiers and the comment made by the Prime Minister, is it correct to say that it is now the intention of the federal government not to make decisions regarding withdrawal from shared-cost programs without meaningful consultation and discussion with the provinces in advance? Would this be a fair statement of the government's position?

Right Hon. P.-E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): No, Mr. Speaker. On this subject we have taken the view that if yesterday the federal government had undertaken to make any such clear-cut promises it would in effect have been amending the constitution, perhaps without the legal power to do so. We do not want to take the position that the federal government spending power could be limited just by a promise made by the Prime Minister of Canada to the assembled provincial premiers. Therefore the whole question of the spending power is open for debate. It is a very important aspect of the constitution, and we have repeatedly suggested that the premiers and the prime ministers of the provinces address themselves to this question. There will be an on-going study of the question of the spending power and whether it should be limited.

Mr. Stanfield: I have a supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. Does the Prime Minister regard it as a limitation on the spending power to undertake meaningful consultation before a federal decision is made, and does the answer that he gave me with regard to the withdrawal from shared cost proposals also concern the adoption of new programs? In other words, am I to understand that the government is giving no assurance that meaningful consultations would take place with the provinces before any new programs are undertaken involving action by the provinces within the field of provincial jurisdiction?

Mr. Trudeau: That is really begging the question. I repeat that as a matter of government policy we believe in consultation in all

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the concrete instances which were debated, especially the topic of medicare, on which there had been a great deal of consultation. For that reason I do not want to say that the government will refuse to exercise its constitutional rights to use its spending power in the ways it sees fit. I repeat, however, that as a matter of policy I believe in consultation and emphasize that the government has practised it. But I do not want to imply that the federal spending power can only be exercised after a certain form of consultation which is, say, acceptable to the provinces, to a majority of them or to all of them. The policy again is in the direction—please go ahead, Mr. Speaker.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Andrew Brewin (Greenwood): I should like to ask the Prime Minister through you, Mr. Speaker, whether in view of the central importance in constitutional matters of the exercise of the spending power of the federal parliament, this will be one of the specific subjects which may be referred to the special committee of this parliament to be set up to consider these matters generally?

Mr. Trudeau: I would say that this might eventually be one of the specific subjects, Mr. Speaker, but it will not be one of the earlier subjects for discussion because it is not one which has as yet been studied by the continuing committee of officials, and in regard to which the provincial governments have submitted propositions. We would prefer to deal with matters which have already been studied by those concerned.

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Is it then the view of the Prime Minister that a condition precedent to the consideration of these important issues by parliament is that they must first be canvassed and dealt with by experts?

Mr. Trudeau: We believe it is useful to have experts explore these subjects, delineate their specific areas and submit possible solutions to the federal and provincial governments in order that they may have an easier task in making up their minds as between various alternatives.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Caouette (Témiscamingue): Mr. Speaker, I have a supplementary question for the Prime Minister.