

*Dominion-Provincial Conference*

● (2:10 p.m.)

The reason I suggested that the Prime Minister should consider discussing with provincial premiers the establishment of similar committees in the provincial legislatures is that you obviously cannot involve all the people of Canada in detailed discussions of the constitution. However, you should involve their elected representatives in the various levels of government in order that they may present their ideas and exchange views as to what our country should be now and in the future. It is obvious that if it is left to governments only to discuss these matters, the federal government and the ten provincial governments, which are in the seats of power, will hesitate to change the constitution. They will not readily agree to reduce their power. Members of parliament and members of provincial legislatures have not had the unavoidably corrupting influence of the actual exercise of powers. They should participate in the discussion so that the purposes for which the power is to be used will be properly decided.

I suggest that the Prime Minister, I am sure with the best intentions, somewhat exaggerated the contents of the conference which concluded Wednesday. I hasten to add it was a very useful conference. The major achievement of the conference was twofold. First, on the question of language rights, ground which has been lost since February, 1968, was regained. At least, it was regained to a useful extent. More important, as both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) correctly underline, is the fact that the conference ended in a mood of determination to continue this work at an accelerated pace. This alone made the three-day conference extremely important and valuable to the future of our country.

It is an exaggeration to say that the consensus which the right hon. Prime Minister tabled this morning contained any real agreement among the governments on any of the issues covered in that consensus. The fact is the consensus consists of decisions to refer every single matter to a committee, either a continuing committee, a committee of ministers or a subcommittee. When more concrete resolutions were brought forward which the officials wanted the conference to accept in principle, such as the desirability of entrenchment against the infringement of human rights, these resolutions were objected to and watered down.

I do not say this in criticism of the Prime Minister or of any of the provincial premiers.

[Mr. Lewis.]

In view of the loss in co-operative climate since February, 1968, it would have been unrealistic to expect firm agreement, even in principle, on matters of great concern to everyone at the conference. I emphasize the fact that on the real problems in depth discussion and confrontation have not yet taken place. They are in the future. The difficulties are by no means behind us. They are ahead of us. I am sure the Prime Minister will readily agree that is the case.

I am not discouraged by the fact that Canada has problems and conflicts. History shows any country without problems is probably dead, and one without conflict is probably dying. Progress is made from the solution of problems and conflicts which continually present themselves in society. I do not expect that at any stage of human development a plateau will be reached where there will be no problems and no conflicts. That is inconceivable.

Every member of this house, I am sure, wants this country to resolve our present problems and conflicts so that we may reach a higher plateau for the endeavour of our people. A total review of the constitution is essential in order to meet our needs today and in the future. We reject the notion of a piece-meal patch-up here and there, which would not take into account the development of a modernized industrialized society. The development of our society is becoming increasingly urbanized, and new problems arise for the overwhelming majority of our population, even those who are wealthy, and particularly for the poor and near-poor.

Our position, Mr. Speaker, is unequivocal. After some years of study and discussion there should be a new constitution which would strengthen and not weaken the capacities and powers of the Canadian government and parliament to care for all the people of Canada. It must strengthen and not weaken the federal government and the federal parliament to enable them to establish minimum and equal standards across Canada in income, public services, educational opportunities, health and welfare, decent housing, clean air, and unpolluted water for Canadians in every part of this country regardless of their background and origin.

I have stated this national objective in uninspiring and simple words. This national objective will not be achieved by reducing the federal spending power. The attitude of the Prime Minister regarding the Canadian