

Constitution Amendment, 1987

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, earlier in his speech the Minister of Justice (Mr. Hnatyshyn) reminded us that the House of Commons was an adversarial forum. In his closing words he then invited us to dismiss partisanship. He knows the nature of this place. I will agree with him on one feature of his remarks, that this indeed should be an historic debate. Certainly the numbers in attendance this morning for this very important discussion in the House of Commons on the constitutional fabric of our country, on the very bedrock of the laws of Canada, neither justify nor amplify the Minister's remarks in that respect.

• (1200)

We agree that what we are discussing here involves the most important law of our country. It follows upon the 1981-1982 debates, the patriation of our Constitution. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms was a great achievement of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, but it was incomplete. Quebec did not sign the accord at that time. There was a gap or an emptiness which did not bring the country as fully together as all of us would have wanted.

It is for that reason that despite its flaws—and it has flaws—we support the Accord, because it brings Quebec into the Canadian constitutional family politically, emotionally, and psychologically.

[Translation]

For all these reasons and despite its shortcomings, Mr. Speaker, I support the Accord. Back in 1982, thanks to Mr. Trudeau we did patriate the Canadian Constitution, but the process fell somewhat short since Quebec, headed by Mr. Lévesque and an independence-oriented administration, had refused to sign the Accord. Although strictly and legally bound under the Constitution, Quebec did feel the need to find its true place within our Canadian confederation and, more important still, within the Canadian family, to be part of it politically, emotionally and psychologically.

[English]

I know from the experience of 1971, when I had the honour of holding the place which the Minister of Justice now holds, that the constitutional process is a long, delicate and sometimes tedious one, and for good reason. The balance of powers between the federal and provincial Governments in the uneasy equilibrium of a federation is not to be tampered with unnecessarily.

I felt that in Victoria, under the leadership of Mr. Trudeau, we had achieved a model of political consensus, a model which was dissipated when Mr. Bourassa at that time felt it impossible, because of the pressure of public opinion in Quebec, to ratify that Accord.

Then of course came the rise of the Parti Québécois and its gain in the significant election of November 15, 1976; the referendum of 1980; and the tremendously emotional debate which gripped the Province of Quebec, family against family, colleague against colleague, partner against partner, business

associate against business associate. The debate went right to the core of the province and of the French speaking Québécois of the province.

I think the most memorable event was the absolutely magnificent speech of Mr. Trudeau at the Paul Sauvé Arena, a speech which I credit with finally turning the tide in favour of Canada. It was a remarkable achievement. I think it was one of the great political speeches in the history of the country. It was certainly the greatest political speech to my mind in his own political career.

In that speech he gave a commitment to the people of Quebec that there would be a renewed federalism.

[Translation]

To put it in French, in a masterly address to a crowd of 15,000 to 20,000 people gathered at the Paul Sauvé Arena, Mr. Trudeau made a commitment by stating that if Quebecers were to reject the seduction of independence and opt for Canada there would be a renewed federalism. This is why Quebec francophones, in particular, supported Canada. This is why I said at the November Liberal Convention that Quebec had said yes to Canada, and that now time had come for Canada to say yes to Quebec.

[English]

What we have before us, of course, is the undoubted fact that Quebec is an essential part not only of our Constitution but of that subtle complex called the Canadian identity. The people of Quebec and the institutions of Quebec must be seen to be an integral part of the total fabric of Canada.

However, the 1982 patriation of the Constitution, the 1982 law, and even the Charter were not accepted by the National Assembly in Quebec City. One ought to recall that it was a unanimous vote which rejected the 1982 arrangement, not just members of the Parti Québécois but the Liberal Members as well, because the people of Quebec felt that their province had been left out. They felt that the achievement ratified by Parliament and the other provinces was incomplete.

It is that essential fact which prompts me—and we will analyse this Accord—to support the Accord despite its flaws to ensure that Quebec becomes once again a major party to our Confederation, a major part of future constitutional reform, and that the people of Quebec feel totally at ease and totally comfortable with the Canadian fact and Canadian identity.

I am proud to lead a Party which has always been at the forefront of constitutional reform in Canada. I believe that the constructive work done by members of our Party has helped bring about the process which we are debating.

We did not negotiate this Accord. I was not present at the table. We would have done it differently. Our November resolution set forth the parameters of where we thought the response to Mr. Bourassa's proposition should be. However, we believe that the Accord is a positive step. We also believe that it can be improved without jeopardizing the Accord.