

CONSTITUTIONAL CONFERENCE

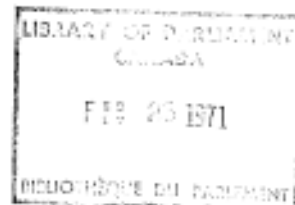
THIRD WORKING SESSION

FEBRUARY 8 AND 9, 1971

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE

HONOURABLE RICHARD B. HATFIELD

PREMIER OF NEW BRUNSWICK



Prime Minister and Colleagues:

I welcome your cordial invitation to speak in a general sense before we turn to the agenda.

There is a saying we have - "You will find it in New Brunswick". You will find a proud and intense devotion to Canada; in a nation accounted wealthy among nations, you will find in New Brunswick abject, continuing and depressing poverty. In the realities of provincial life, constitutional discussion is not a dominant feature; reality is the hard rock of inadequate services and poverty.

New Brunswick has participated fully in these discussions since their inception. We will continue to do so. It would be my hope that our participation will be fully effective at the several levels of our participation.

The existing Constitution is not a perfect instrument; nevertheless, in a century of operation, it has been able to accommodate a nation of continental proportions, to embrace the great technological changes of the century, to accommodate socio-economic change, and to accommodate substantial diversities. If the provisions do not meet a consensus of satisfaction, dissatisfaction is not universal.

There is an intent, a purpose and a resiliency in the terms and operation of the existing constitution that should be carried forward. We accept the fact that change may be required where provisions or arrangements are obsolete or do not meet compelling need.

The participation of New Brunswick in the review under way has been prefaced, as it continues to be, on the unity and integrity of the nation, on a federalism designed to give full play to the energies and aspirations of Canadians, on a central government able to achieve national cohesion, and on provincial governments with powers and resources to carry out their proper needs and responsibilities.

It is not my intention to use this occasion to articulate in any detail our views on the several matters under review. We see, however, no alternative to a strong central government; only such a government can meet the requisities of national and international existence; only such a government can provide and ensure the rights Canadians hold and should enjoy in common.

There is in New Brunswick no particular desire to diminish Federal power or to augment provincial powers or to retain existing provincial powers undiminished. In the complexities of today's life, we do not regard existing allocations as immutable; we would find little comfort in barren rights.

We regard revision and re-allocation of powers as functional questions to be resolved in a manner that will neither frustrate the future nor disregard the unity of the nation and the aspirations of its people.

The preoccupation with revision has already been lengthy. The process cannot be described as one of deliberate hesitation: the matters on this agenda, as on past agendas, do not lend themselves to easy or instant solution. I sense, however, some concern for more deliberate speed; we will participate fully in any expedition of the process.

I have resisted the impulse of a new government to review at this time the deliberations and decisions of previous conferences. But I have said enough to indicate that we fully support the principle of maintaining vigorous spending power in the national interest in the areas of health, welfare, education and other fundamental social services; that we fully support the federal spending power on shared cost programs; that we fully support equal standards of living and approximately equal standards of services as an objective of the Confederation with effective power in the federal government to alleviate regional disparities; and that we fully support the consensus reached on linguistic matters. We are, of course, very much concerned that there should be meaningful consultation in the relevant areas of concern.

There will be no surprise at this table if I repeat a theme: our paramount interest in New Brunswick is not in a compulsive concern for constitutional revision but for the application of constitutional powers to bring about an improvement in the quality and conditions of life. In the century since Confederation, the Province has been almost continuously depressed, brutally poor, and wholly unable to reach acceptable levels of services.

Under one plan of assistance or another, under a succession of plans, the Province has struggled from generation to generation: the burden and the misery have been and are of appalling proportions. For us, economic problems are at the level and at the very apex of practical constitutional significance.

I would be the first, Mr. Prime Minister, to separate the constitutional review process from the on-going problems of application and I am in full agreement with the decision in this respect taken at earlier conferences. It remains a truism, nevertheless, that a constitution is designed to meet the needs of its people. The high purpose of these discussions was crystalized in the objective that we might find a better way of doing things for the Canada of tomorrow.

We in the Maritime Provinces are to give exploratory consideration to the question of union. But our consideration must be enhanced by a federal commitment that the new province

would be viable. Our problems, in my judgment, cannot be resolved by a mere tinkering with constitutional mechanisms.

There must be a commitment to regional policies and an appropriate diversification in the application of national policies. I appreciate, Prime Minister, your interest and the steps you have taken.

I thank you for the opportunity to express these general remarks.