

Government Orders

For the first time in our history for more than 100 years, we said that this Constitution of ours, this charter of ours now belonged to Canadians, not to parliamentarians, not to heads of government, not to provincial premiers, parties and municipalities, but to Canadians.

• (1550)

Therefore, the underlying weakness if I can put it this way, of pretty well all the constitutional agreements that have gone on since then was the belief that governments by themselves could then make significant decisions. Too much criticism has focused in some ways on the substance of what went wrong with Meech and too little on the process.

The lesson we have learned is that Canadians must and will be consulted. I say frankly that I am not really too concerned as to whether or not we find such unanimity in the country in the next month, that there will be no need for a referendum. That is because I believe in the final analysis, and this will be the happiest of stories, that if there is an agreement by first ministers, heads of territorial governments and aboriginal leaders on a constitutional package, it may still be important and significant that Canadians from coast to coast to coast say Amen to that package.

What I am concerned about is that we provide the process for Canadians to participate in an understandable, fair and reasonable fashion. That is not going to be an easy exercise.

I want to caution members on all sides that we tried to establish or design so restrictive a piece of referendum machinery that it fundamentally will fail even before it gets used. I do not even, at this stage, feel very happy with the word referendum. It smacks too much of some kind of absolute, binding decision coming from the body politic.

I think the first time out we should back off a little bit and think of it more as a plebiscite, more as a means to do something with Canadians that will allow them to take greater ownership both for the present constitutional package and indeed for the whole ongoing process.

I am not one of those who believe that we are going to resolve all of these constitutional issues this week, this

month or this year. Nobody should inflate the expectations to that point.

There are several critical aspects that must be resolved having to do with finally letting Quebecers feel a full part of this Constitution, resolving some of the regional tensions particularly with respect to institutions in the Senate for our friends in western and eastern Canada, and ultimately providing real justice for the aboriginal people.

How all of that gets defined in a package will be important. But let us not put a strait-jacket on the process because we are doing something, in my view, that has not been done before. In that instance, we have to maintain some kind of flexibility and freedom in the final legislation that is being devised.

I welcome its introduction here. I welcome the support from members on all sides. I hope we can keep that sense of flexibility and freedom to achieve what is our ultimate purpose. That purpose is to allow Canadians to come to some point of real consensus this year, in 1992, about our Constitution and about our country.

Mr. Dennis Mills (Broadview—Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, I would like to pick up where my friend who holds the neighbouring riding of Rosedale left off.

I too agree that this is a whole new journey for each and everyone of us. We would have to say that there is one exception here. That is the member of Parliament for Etobicoke—Lakeshore. He should feel very proud today of the fact that he has worked from the very beginning to develop a package which would ultimately end up as a piece of national legislation. It is so rare that a sole member of Parliament has the capacity and the skill to do that. He deserves a lot of credit.

I also have to remind the House that my leader a year ago brought up with force this idea of getting into a plebiscite discussion or referendum debate. I share the view of my colleague from Glengarry—Prescott—Russell who said: "I wish we had a little bit more time than three or four days to iron this thing out".

I am going to approach this from a totally different point of view in my community.