

It is also high time that the Prime Minister responded to over 40,000 letters which I personally delivered to his office last month. They were sent to me by concerned Canadians demanding that the government conduct a binding national referendum on any future constitutional package.

The Prime Minister's office claimed it received only approximately 10,000 such letters. I will leave it to the Canadian people to decide who is telling the truth and perhaps who is not.

At any rate, I am pleased to see the government so interested in direct democracy and consultation of the Canadian public and they say that a leopard can never change its spots. However, enthusiastic as I am about the prospects of a national vote on the Constitution, I nevertheless hold some serious reservations about the government's sincerity in doing so and the contents of the bill itself.

Before I go on let me make my position completely clear. While I support the general direction the government has taken in tabling referendum legislation, this does not necessarily mean that either I or my party will support the final question proposed by the federal government.

Only if the question is truly national in scope and adheres to the principle of equality of all provinces, and only if the question allows for a yes or no response to the final package as a whole, might I or my party support a referendum question on any future constitutional amendments.

One would assume that if the government were truly serious about soliciting the will of the Canadian public it would give this legislation all the force that a real referendum requires. That is, this bill should be more than just an advisory mechanism for the government's own use. Rather the results of any vote should be binding on this House.

I realize that a binding mechanism would necessitate an amendment under section 41 of the Constitution Act, 1982, which would require the unanimous consent of all provincial legislatures. This does not prevent the government from adopting a simple motion that states that the House would adhere to the results of such a vote.

It is a simple matter. If the government considers itself a democratic entity it should have no problem in comply-

ing with such a simple request. By strict definition this bill provides only for a plebiscite, not a referendum.

Canadians are not simply asking that the government listen to them and then pat them on the head and tell them to go away. They want a real opportunity to express their feelings on the most important document in this country. Instead, the government has chosen to deny Canadians their fundamental rights in a free and democratic society by once again shutting them out of the process.

Yes, the government will let them vote on some sort of manipulated question. But what good is all this if the government can then turn around and reject the results or, worse yet, twist the results to its own satisfaction simply for the purpose of partisan gain?

I submit that this is the only intention of the government in the first place. This toothless bill is simply an attempt by the government to make itself appear more democratic when in reality perhaps democracy is the farthest thing from its mind.

This fact is expressed in the comments of the government House leader himself who has said recently that he would prefer not to have a referendum at all. The same House leader has termed this legislation: "A weapon to be used only if the various premiers and other leaders involved in this process do not comply with the government's own constitutional vision".

• (1130)

In the final analysis a constitutional referendum, if the government chooses even to conduct one at all, will be meaningless and subject to the whims and political gamesmanship of this Tory government.

I fear that perhaps the government is more concerned about achieving a deal than it is about achieving true unity. I hate to think that the government would be obsessed with a short-term patchwork truce rather than working without artificial deadlines and crises toward a long-term cohesive solution which will celebrate the true equality of all provinces and all citizens.

I therefore restate my belief that if Bill C-81 is to advance the cause of democracy in this country it must be amended in order that a national referendum must be conducted on any final constitutional package. In addition, a motion must be proposed that the results of such a referendum be binding on this or any other future government.