

Oral Questions

Speaking before the greater Quebec City Chamber of Commerce yesterday, the Prime Minister stated that Quebec constitutes a distinct society because it has its own language, culture and institutions, but refused to give this fact formal recognition in the Canadian Constitution.

If he is serious in making his own the notion of distinct society as defined in the Meech Lake accord, can the Prime Minister tell us why he has so far refused to make a commitment to amend the constitution to include this definition of distinct society?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it takes some nerve on the part of an hon. member who voted against a distinct society in the Quebec referendum on the Charlottetown accord to rise in this House and ask me if I support the notion of distinct society.

I have always said, and we voted accordingly, that these matters were discussed in the collective document issued by the no side. But the Bloc Québécois and its members across the way all voted against the distinct society clause when it was introduced. It was included in the Charlottetown accord, yet they all voted against it. It takes some nerve to come and blame us for that today. In rejecting it, for all kinds of reasons, they actually sided with the Reform Party against the Charlottetown accord. We, on the other hand, voted for and believe in it.

As for the constitution, it will be amended if and when discussions are held on the matter. The existing amending formula, as proposed by Mr. Lévesque, requires the consent of at least seven provinces. The federal government really cannot speak for the provinces because, as Mr. Lévesque put it at the time, all the provinces are equal and must take part in the constitutional amendment process.

Mrs. Pierrette Venne (Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we support the concept of distinct society when it really means something.

Must we gather from the Prime Minister's refusal to make a commitment to recognize Quebec as a distinct society in the constitution that he not only does not believe in it himself but that he is also unable to get a sufficient number of provinces to agree on this issue?

• (1435)

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is beyond me how the hon. member, who voted against the distinct society clause, can ask me to make all kinds of promises in this respect. She was against this concept and voted accordingly. Now she claims that it was not really the concept of distinct society, that it was not the right term. The question that was just put to me was: Do you support the concept of distinct society? My answer is yes and I might add that the hon. member voted against the distinct society clause.

[English]

BOSNIA

Mr. Jim Hart (Okanagan—Similkameen—Merritt, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of National Defence. I hope he knows his cabinet colleague announced the government's intention to send our troops back to Bosnia without consultation despite a number of serious shortcomings in the Canadian Armed Forces, including inadequate equipment, low morale and the current troop rotation. Some of our troops have been there for the third time.

How can the minister even consider sending our troops back to Bosnia without addressing these concerns?

Mr. Fred Mifflin (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Defence and Minister of Veterans Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am not really sure what the hon. member's question is pertaining to.

I am perplexed by his question. As a previous member of the Canadian forces he knows the resiliency of the Canadian forces and their capacity to do what is asked of them despite adverse conditions and despite tasking.

I do not think anybody would disagree that our troops have had more than their fair share of work. The Prime Minister has indicated the work they have done has saved millions of lives and we should be very proud of that.

The hon. member is suggesting the Canadian forces do not have the capacity to participate in whatever decision is being made. Inasmuch as that decision is being made, I would prefer not to comment on it right now.

However, I assure him that if the government decides to participate in the NATO peace implementation plan, in the reconstruction of Bosnia or in the help for refugees it will be able to do what it plans to because the Canadian forces will have the capacity.

Mr. Jim Hart (Okanagan—Similkameen—Merritt, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, evidence is increasing that our troops in Somalia were let down by their leadership.

Canadians have confidence in our troops in the field but they have serious reservations about the senior chain of command. It is the privates and the corporals who must bear the burden of this lack of leadership.

Canadians are asking is it wise for the government to volunteer our troops before the Somalia commission has reached its final conclusion?

Mr. Fred Mifflin (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Defence and Minister of Veterans Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has already indicated that before decisions are made, whether there is a vote or not, we will have a discussion in the House.

I repeat, the Canadian forces will be capable of doing what the government asks them to do. If the member is suggesting morale