

Government Orders[*Translation*]

I took a survey of my riding last year. I even tabled a copy of the survey I had taken of the people of Glengarry—Prescott—Russell in this House when we had the big constitutional debate. Some 500 people in Glengarry—Prescott—Russell took part. I shared the survey results with all hon. members. I even wrote a letter to all members of the Beaudoin—Dobbie committee, which dealt with the whole issue. I did that so hon. members and this House would have not only the opinions of committee members and of interest groups that appeared before the parliamentary committee but of the people of my riding or in any case a sampling of my constituents. I must tell you that our people in Glengarry—Prescott—Russell really participated and I want to congratulate them on that.

In conclusion, I would express the wish in this House today that all hon. members will vote for this bill on second reading and I would also hope that the government will be flexible and take account of the constructive amendments from the Official Opposition in this House. I hope that we will then be able to support this bill on final reading. But what I want more is to have a referendum passed by all Canadians so that we can finally unite our country.

[*English*]

Hon. David MacDonald (Rosedale): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate as, indeed, other hon. members have. I want to raise several matters that perhaps have not been raised sufficiently in the context of what I think is a very important augmentation to our democratic system.

The very fact that Canada has not relied over its 125-year history on the use of plebiscites and referenda must tell us something. In fact, even though we know that back in the 1970s Mr. Trudeau's government introduced legislation that would have allowed for a referendum, it did not in fact get approved.

Private members, including our own member for Toronto—Lakeshore, have proposed similar legislation and, of course, it was promised as one of the items in the Speech from the Throne a year ago. All of this indicates that we are on the edge of something that is in effect a significant departure from our normal traditions in this country, certainly nationally and even provincially.

While there have been instances over the last 125 years of plebiscites and referenda, they have not been used with any consistency. Anybody who has lived in other countries like Switzerland will know that referenda and plebiscites become almost a way of life when individual cantons on weekends will be invited to vote on just about every question from whether there is going to be a park installed, the garbage will be picked up or anything else that might affect some kind of local condition.

However, that has not been a part of our political tradition. In fact I would have to say speaking in this House this afternoon that if I had been asked at any time prior to the last several years whether I thought referenda and plebiscites made any kind of sense for our democratic system, I would have said categorically "no". I do not know whether this is evidence of either old age or the willingness to change one's mind, but I have now become convinced that answer is no longer sufficient or acceptable. I am convinced for several reasons.

First, I want to say that as a member of two of the committees that have dealt with the Constitution in the last few years, the Charest committee several years ago and more recently Beaudoin—Edwards, there has been one message that has been there from start to finish and that is that on matters with respect to the Constitution of this country, it is no longer sufficient that heads of government or elected representatives by themselves make fundamental decisions about the nature of our Constitution.

I think we should acknowledge the fact that this is a significant departure from a previous era. In fact, I can remember no time during my time here as a member since the mid-1960s when there was any great public outcry or concern to be consulted.

First Ministers Conferences, conferences on the Constitution actually from the 1930s were held with frequency and abandon but never was there a clear-cut call for a ratification by some kind of public means.

However, since the Meech decision in 1987, the underlying message of the body politic in this country is: "We want to be consulted. We want to have some final say". Why is that? I think the reasons really flow from the events of the early 1980s. I believe that something fundamental happened to Canada when we patriated our Constitution and accepted a charter of rights.