

• (1150)

The bill now says that each regulation that the Chief Electoral officer proposes shall be deposited with the Clerk of the House of Commons at least seven days before the day on which the regulation is proposed to be made. The appropriate committee of the House of Commons may make such recommendations it considers appropriate to the Chief Electoral Officer.

The Chief Electoral Officer, as an officer of Parliament, will be grateful to us for such a useful clause as it will allow him to take advantage of the background and past experience of hon. members. This clause will help guarantee that any regulation the government may use to govern the campaign is not only fair, but perceived to be fair.

Finally, other changes accepted by the committee deal with issues like enumeration for elections and revision of lists of electors, but there is also another very important change.

Bill C-81, as originally proposed, contained a sunset clause which provided that it would remain in force for a period of three years only, unless extended by a joint resolution of both houses of Parliament.

Our colleague, the hon. member for Etobicoke-Lakeshore, proposed to change that and provide for a review after three years. This change, introduced by an ardent proponent of direct democracy, means that Canada will keep on the books, for an indeterminate period of time, a statute dealing with constitutional referendums.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, we have before us a bill that enables us to hold referendums on constitutional matters, if this is deemed useful. It does not, and I stress this point, commit us to hold a referendum. Rather, it allows us to prepare for a referendum in a way that will eliminate any doubt about its fairness and openness, and inspire confidence in its results.

This legislation respects the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in allowing for maximum participation; freedom of speech is respected while ensuring accountability. As members of Parliament, we are creating a new right to participate in the event of a referendum; with this new right comes the responsibility to campaign according to rules that are clear and fair and enforced by

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someone in whom we all have the utmost confidence, the Chief Electoral Officer.

I am confident that this legislation is good for Canada. It will induce participation. If the government, at its discretion, decides that a referendum must be held, we will be ready.

Hon. André Ouellet (Papineau—Saint-Michel): I would like to express my thanks to the minister for his intervention during which he quite justly reminded us that some of the amendments proposed by the Liberal Party as well as by the NDP and the Tories have been accepted. I believe he is absolutely right in saying that with these amendments, the bill is a much better one than it was in the beginning.

There is however an amendment which was not received either by the House or by the committee because the Clerk of Committee had recommended to the chairman to rule against it because it was beyond the scope of the bill. It is a political matter and I would like to ask him a question about it. The question I wish to put to him deals with the interpretation of the results if there is a referendum.

We, of the Liberal Party of Canada, would have preferred that the bill provide for the results of a national referendum to be interpreted on a regional basis and that, God forbid, if a majority of citizens, Quebecers for example, refused to give their approval to the question, the Government of Canada commit itself not to implement the constitutional proposal.

I understand that the proposed amendment was ruled out of order, but the question remains: If the government has a referendum inviting Canadians to vote on a series of constitutional proposals, will the Conservative government give us the assurance that it will not implement these proposals if a majority of Canadians do not give their approval in all four regions of the country?

Mr. Danis: Mr. Speaker, were we to focus the debate on the political issue instead of on the legal nature of the amendment my hon. colleague presented in committee, I would agree with his position and with his amendment if the referendum bill introduced by the Government of Canada was binding. Then, I would understand why he moved this amendment which, I must say, I would tend to support.