

Private Members' Business

up this process. Let us open up these doors and let the people have a say as to what they want us to do.

I think we should refer this subject to a standing committee, maybe have some hearings on this issue, and allow the people to participate before we make a quick decision either yes or no.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Saint-Julien (Abitibi): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join in the debate on the motion put forward by the hon. member for Calgary-Northeast.

Our colleague is urging the House to endorse a constitutional amendment in a measure he calls the Constitution Act, 1990 (referendum). In accordance with this amendment a referendum on any matter coming within the classes of subjects enumerated in section 91 of the Constitution Act, 1867 might be initiated either by Government of Canada proclamation or by petition of not less than 10 per cent of the electors of Canada.

The purpose of the motion is interesting. Although Canada is among the freest and most democratic countries on earth, it is important always to seek to strengthen public participation in the affairs of the state. Such is the very essence of our democratic tradition, which is indeed the envy of many other countries.

If there is one conclusion to be drawn from the recent Meech Lake Accord constitutional debate it is that Canadians want to have their say on important issues in this country.

Still I would suggest that the hon. member's proposition deserves closer scrutiny.

First, is that the only way to let Canadians take part in the business of the nation? No. Referenda are not the only way we have to reach our objectives. Among other options which spring to mind, for instance, we could hold public hearings where Canadians would be asked to speak out about the issue at hand.

Mr. Speaker, this kind of public consultation would enable us to hear the main arguments, and it is a process that can readily be initiated.

Since the beginning of Confederation, this form of public consultation has been used almost exclusively at the provincial level. There were the two referendums held in Newfoundland, in June and July 1948, which gave the population of Newfoundland a chance to decide whether or not the province would enter Confederation. There was also the referendum held in May 1980, in Quebec, on the future of that province within the Canadian Constitution.

There were other instances at the provincial level, especially in the Western provinces. Interestingly, most of these consultations were about prohibition.

Nationally, however, and that is the focus of the debate today, Canada has resorted only twice to this form of consultation since Confederation: in 1898, prohibition and in 1942 on conscription.

Mr. Speaker, I will not dwell on the debate that took place on this issue in Quebec and the other provinces. Suffice it to recall that on the day of the plebiscite, April 27, 1942, French Canadians in this country voted 80 per cent against the government's proposal, while English Canadians voted massively in favour.

The episode caused profound divisions between French Canadians and English Canadians on this issue. Mr. Speaker, this does not mean we should reject out of hand the possibility of having referendums at the national level. I merely wish to stress that this method of public consultation, attractive though its objectives may be, bears with it a real risk, as we have seen, of polarizing public opinion and dividing Canadians. In fact, it forces a decision without necessarily allowing for further discussion or encouraging consultation. It seems to exacerbate differences, to divide voters into two camps—for or against—leaving no room for compromise.

That is why I find it difficult to support the hon. member's motion right now. Considering the many ramifications and major consequences of such a decision, I think the proposal requires careful study. It would be most unwise to proceed before having been able to analyze all the aspects, all the consequences and before determining how we should proceed, something the hon. member proposes to do after rather than before the amendment is passed.

Mr. Speaker, if we decide that a referendum is the best way to involve the public, we must consider, for instance,