

Oral Questions

How does the Prime Minister explain his about-face in refusing to accept the outcome of the Quebec referendum?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I actually made this statement in the riding of the Leader of the Opposition, in Alma. At the time, when they asked me, I said there would be a referendum and we would win. And we had a referendum. All this took place before the first referendum. Since then, the Leader of the Opposition and the separatists have been saying that they will never take no for an answer. So they have never said they would accept a no vote as valid.

The Leader of the Opposition has again said recently himself that there will be referendum after referendum—except Quebecers have heard enough talk about the constitution and do not want to hear any more about it. They want to hear about the real problems concerning Quebecers: job creation, income security, peace for seniors. This is exactly what this government wants to do—look after the country's real problems—while they are busy playing with hypothetical questions. However, they will be making no more speeches after October 30.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my question was not about hypothetical remarks, but about remarks the Prime Minister took the time to write. I imagine it was he who wrote his book. It was before 1985, well before the Bélanger-Campeau Commission, well before Meech and all that. I am asking the Prime Minister how he can justify changing his mind on such a basic question, when he stated before the Bélanger-Campeau Commission, in 1990-1991 I would remind you, and I quote: "I am a democrat, and I said so in 1980. Had we not recognized that Quebec could decide to separate, we would have acted differently".

Why is he not saying the same thing today? Are the years eroding logic?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I made that statement before the other referendum. We had a referendum, but Canada won. So the problem was settled.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Chrétien (Saint-Maurice): I wrote that before, in 1986, and I said at the time that we were going to respect the referendum that was held and we won. Now the opposition keeps saying that there will be no end, that there will be a referendum so long as it fails to win. I have to say that it is very important to respect democracy and that, at the moment, the question put by the Parti Québécois, by the leader of the Leader of the Opposition, is ambiguous; it will create an ambiguous situation, and Quebecers do not want an ambiguous situation. They decided to remain in Canada, and Canada will be the winner on October 30.

• (1440)

[English]

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I have to say that I am extremely disturbed and I think Canadians will be disturbed at the answers the Prime Minister gave to the leader of the Reform Party.

We have the separatists in Quebec telling Quebecers that they can vote yes and have this imaginary union. Now we have the Prime Minister saying that a no vote counts and a yes vote may not count. I ask the Prime Minister to reconsider that position carefully. Is he not really telling Quebecers that it is easy and without risk to vote yes when that is not the case?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do not know what the real question is the member is asking me. I am always telling Quebecers that they have a chance to vote again on this.

For months and months I have asked the Government of Quebec to ask a clear question. It is asking an ambiguous question. Reading any comment on that from abroad they all say it is terribly confusing. They say we will get divorced and then remarry.

The member is asking me to say yes to the question without any analysis. Even then they say to Quebecers that separation will not come the day after. Therefore, do not tell me to tell them that it will be over on October 31. This country will be together on October 31 of this year and on October 31 of next year. As long as I am alive it will be part of Canada. Therefore, I do not want to spend my time talking about separation.

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, this country is not going to stay together just on the basis of one man's interpretation of a referendum question. It will stay together because the Prime Minister and others are successful in convincing Quebecers to vote no.

I again ask the Prime Minister why he does not simply do what the Leader of the Opposition is unwilling to do and tell Quebecers that their vote counts, yes or no, and that democracy is on the side of the federalists?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, no one that I know of has talked more about Canada and Quebec. I know they will vote for Canada even with this ambiguous question. Therefore, I do not want to spend my time replying to these hypothetical questions. We will campaign in Quebec and Quebecers will know that it is in their best interests to remain in Canada.

I do not understand why the Reform Party is trying to score political points when it is time for all Canadians to be on the same side in convincing Quebecers to stay in Canada.