

during the ice-free season between May and December for about 50 years now.

The operation of the ferry service is subsidized by the federal government because it recognizes that the service is an important alternative to the service required under the Constitution that is operated by Marine Atlantic Inc. between Borden, Prince Edward Island and Cape Tormentine, New Brunswick. The Government of Canada clearly recognizes the importance of the Wood Islands—Caribou ferry service to the economy of the eastern part of the Island.

The federal subsidy for 1991–1992 will be in the range of \$7.5 million. In addition, as the member has just noted, the federal government has awarded a contract valued at close to \$43 million to Pictou Industries Ltd. to construct a new 200-car ferry for the service.

Funding has also been provided and work has begun on the redevelopment and modification of the related terminal facilities. The need for this investment was justified on the basis of traffic congestion during the peak summer period and the age of the existing ships.

The level of service offered is a reflection of the demand. Northumberland Ferries Ltd. provides over 7,000 single crossings per year, 2,000 more each year than there were 10 years ago. A service in the future will continue to be reviewed and adjusted based on the traffic needs.

The federal government is not presently considering any modification to the Wood Islands—Caribou service because of a fixed link. It would not, however, be appropriate for a fiscally responsible government to make any unconditional government commitment to subsidize the service in perpetuity before the actual impact of a fixed link on the ferry's traffic can be seen.

#### THE CONSTITUTION

**Mr. Pat Nowlan (Annapolis Valley—Hants):** Mr. Speaker, on December 3, 1991, last year, I asked the Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affairs about the apparent flip-flop of the government on the question of a national referendum on the Constitution. The minister replied at that time and suggested that regardless of all the conversation and conflict in the newspa-

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pers about where the government stood on the national referendum, in time the government would be prepared to have a mechanism of consultation with Canadians.

That was in December. We have had the Christmas recess and there has not been a member home listening to constituents and taking the pulse of his people who has not come back to this House knowing that while the Constitution is very fundamental, the question of any constitution at the moment is sort of in a state of paralysis. The public at large is stunned with the smorgasbord of constitutional committees, constitutional consultations, constitutional reports, constitutional conferences, studies, et cetera. The public at large is more preoccupied with the economy and really is not all that happy about anything regarding the Constitution.

We as parliamentarians have to address that because there are certain constitutional clocks ticking. It is only because of this parliamentary procedure that we have where you get an answer to a question and then the member who asked the question has four minutes to elaborate, and then there is supposedly a two-minute response, that you can even have this procedure. In the six minutes allowed, you obviously cannot get into the debate on the detail of all the rights and wrongs of constitutions, let alone the problems with a referendum.

Even though this is the cosy winter of Canada coast to coast, and certainly where I come from we are still dug into a large snowdrift, the people have time to watch TV, and are very much aware that 1992 is the year that is a sort of "high noon" for constitutional decisions. This government is going to have to give effective national leadership—not leadership in regions, but national leadership—on all constitutional questions, including the question of the referendum.

Old Shakespeare said somewhere in one of his plays that the question was "to be or not to be". The time for Canadians to wonder what this government stands for on the fundamental question of a referendum is over, and it is "to be" or at least the mechanism. It has to be either a referendum or, I would suggest, even an election. I know there are a good many sincere people, many good colleagues of ours, who are studying this in a more exhaustive way before the parliamentary committee now. They will be coming in with their report toward the