

Government Orders

Could anybody seriously argue that the people of this country were given an opportunity by the press and the powerbrokers in this country who declared themselves on one side of the issue in their dominance of communication and explanation? Do we really believe that Canadian people ever were given an opportunity to understand what was at issue then and what is going to happen here?

They are going to talk about the status of Quebec, the aboriginal peoples, the division of powers, the charter, a whole host of things. People will be dependent on the public press unless there are some dramatic changes in how this thing is carried out.

Very few confederated nations have successfully held referenda. We have had the example of Australia that has had 32; only 8 were approved. We say that the referendum is in the interests of Canadian unity. Would anybody suggest the 1898 referendum lead to a conclusion that was in the interests of Canadian unity? Would anybody suggest that the 1942 referendum lead to an outcome that was in the interests of Canadian unity?

We have two premises on which we are going to base this referendum. We have no clear message that this process can contribute to democracy, if we understand democracy to be based on informed consent of the electorate. On the other hand, we have problems on the record wherever such referenda have occurred on complicated issues of this sort about whether in fact it will contribute to Canadian unity.

Let me say this: With respect to the issue of Canadian unity there is the question of where minorities fit into the equation. In previous plebiscites it has been the Quebec minority that has been scotched.

I represent a section of this country which the politicians have thoroughly ignored. Our status in this country in terms of citizenship is an unequal citizenship. I am supposed to depend and those whom I represent are supposed to depend on what government says, on what the party says, what the media says, and what the powerbrokers say about the appropriateness of this Constitution.

But will people know that 30 per cent of the population are not to be included in these constitutional proposals? Is that democracy? Is it democracy that questions that are going to be put to the Canadian

people ignore 30 per cent of the people, and will they know that?

There has been almost a conspiracy by our political leaders and the media to help shut out some. If there was going to be any prospect of fairness in this plebiscite, if we are going to assure ourselves it is going to contribute to Canadian unity or the democratic process, then there had better be significant changes in the character of the process that is going to be enforced when this plebiscite takes place.

There had better be serious examination of the question of spending limits, not only of the total expenditures but also who spends and what provisions will ensure that regional minorities or demographic minorities will have a fair shake in all of this. If we are not careful about that this will not contribute to Canadian unity.

What regulations and rules will apply to ensure that Canadians are adequately informed? Every line, every dotted *i* and crossed *t* in that Constitution, must be understood by them and explained to them so that their decision will be on the basis of informed consent in a democratic process that is all too often organized to deny to the people informed consent.

I hope people will understand that the record of referenda and plebiscites in the United States has certainly not been in the interests of democracy. It has been in the interests of those who have the money and who can shape opinions by denying information, denying analysis and denying to the people an understanding of where they are in the process.

If we are going to have a plebiscite and that plebiscite is to be in the interests of either Canadian unity or democracy then there had better be substantive changes in this legislation. Otherwise it will fail democracy; it will fail Canadian unity. A most dangerous outcome could result to the future of Canada if care is not taken.

Miss Deborah Grey (Beaver River): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to enter into the debate on Bill C-81 and say that it certainly is time the government has adopted at least my party's position on holding a referendum on any future constitutional amendments.

I also would like to say that I appreciate and commend the member for Etobicoke—Lakeshore for his efforts over the years on referendum legislation. I know that he has worked tirelessly on this and I know that he is pleased that this is at least happening.