PRIME MINISTER'S POSITION

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister did not answer my question.

The country is looking for decisive national leadership at this very crucial time in the history of the country, and the Premiers are asking for it. We now have an opportunity to do something fundamentally important for the protection of minority rights in the country, similar to what the House of Commons did a few years back when, in the province of Manitoba, there was a threatened abrogation of French-speaking rights and the House adopted a resolution which the Prime Minister, when he was Leader of the Opposition, fully supported.

As a national Leader and the head of the Government what action does the Prime Minister intend to take to deal with the very serious circumstances we are in? Will he call a First Ministers' meeting? Will he put the question of national initiatives to protect minority rights on the agenda? Will he consider eliminating the notwithstanding clause from the Constitution as part of the talks at that First Ministers' meeting?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I think that even my hon. friend will acknowledge that he gets the Christmas prize for temerity. It takes an awful lot of nerve to ask me if we will deal with something in regard to the protection of minority rights, particularly as those minority rights might be affected by a notwithstanding clause.

My recollection is that he was a Member of a Government that gave the notwithstanding clause away, and it should never have been done.

Mr. Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): You are the Government now; take your responsibility.

Ms. Copps: How is the Tory, Sterling Lyon?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker: As I said, the matter at this point is very important to the country, and we should therefore extend a level of courtesy to all Members in this House.

[*English*]

Mr. Mulroney: Mr. Speaker, when I was in Saskatchewan on April 14, 1988, when there was a problem in regard to minority rights, I was asked in the presence of Premier Devine how I fundamentally felt about the concept of minority rights. My philosophy is one that perhaps my hon. friend will allow me to repeat in one line.

I said, if you want to understand how you should deal with minorities ask yourself what it would be like to be in a position of a minority and treat the minority with all the generosity that you would want extended to yourself.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): What are you going to do about it? Come on, Brian, show some leadership on this one.

Mr. Mulroney: That applies to English-speaking minorities in Québec, French-speaking minorities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and elsewhere. It applies across the board.

All Members of the House, all Leaders of political Parties in this House, recognize that language can indeed be a difficult instrument of division, but it can also become an instrument of some unity and strength. It has to be treated fairly and in a responsible, thoughtful manner.

As I indicated yesterday, I will be meeting with the First Ministers.

I think we made very substantial strides with Bill C-72 which provided substantial enhancement of minority language rights in the federal Public Service and across Canada. We did the same thing with the Meech Lake Accord, perhaps not perfectly, but we made great strides in protecting English and French-speaking minority rights across Canada. We can do more.

I am satisfied, if the atmosphere is one of calm reason, that ultimately tolerance and justice, for which Canadians are well known, will prevail and we will have the type of Canada which brings fairness to minorities wherever they are.

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ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

CHARGES AGAINST FORMER MP—GUILTY PLEA

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Prime Minister. Two weeks ago the people of Canada were witness to an unseemly manifestation of corruption in the guilty plea of the former Member of this House for the riding of