

ment in 1978 in which it stated in this explanatory document that it would be an infringement on freedom of speech and freedom of association to force people into umbrella groups and that without these kinds of identifiable umbrella groups it would become an impossibility to limit expenditures.

The advice given to the Liberal government of the day is basically the same advice we are getting, albeit that was before the charter of rights. Now we do have the charter of rights. We are not opposed to limitations.

As the hon. member will know, if she consults with her representatives on the committee studying election law reform, our representatives are calling for the retention of spending limits at general elections. If in fact spending limits were possible, given the charter of rights, given the legal opinions we have, the predecessor Liberal government had, we would consider it, but we are given the best advice we have, that it is not possible.

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, the \$18 million royal commission says the minister's interpretation is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Page 324 states: "Freedom of expression cannot be meaningfully achieved unless the laws that govern this process explicitly seek to promote fairness, equal resources. Nor should electoral law assume that inequalities amongst participants are irrelevant to the outcome of elections".

We see the referendum process as a means of uniting the country. The minister says maybe there will be a referendum; maybe there will be a plebiscite; maybe he will respect the outcome; maybe he will not; maybe it will be in every province; maybe it will be in some; maybe it will be conducted fairly; maybe it will not.

• (1420)

Why is the government playing games at such a critical time in our country's history?

Hon. Harvie Andre (Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, of course, the hon. member for Hamilton East has distorted totally what I have said.

As I indicated in my response to her first answer, the question of limits is not something this government or the party to which all of us belong is something we object to. Indeed, we will be seeking limits.

Oral Questions

I think she will understand that it is quite one thing to have limits on registered political parties at a general election when you are talking about having everybody compete on the same basis within the same constraints and another thing to have a referendum where the number of committees and groups you might have participating is impossible to control because of the infringements on freedom of association and freedom of speech that Marc Lalonde who was then minister stated in this document.

If the member disputes what I have just said to her, if she disputes the legal opinions, perhaps she should discuss it with Marc Lalonde who reached the same conclusion in 1978.

[Translation]

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, the basic rules of democracy apply both to a referendum and a general election. That is the position taken by the Lortie commission, which explained that in a democracy the rules of the game must be fair and equitable and financing must be equal. We did that during the 1980 referendum, so we have nothing to learn from you on that score.

Why is the government trying to hide behind the charter, when the royal commission was clear and specific about the need for spending limits in a democratic process? Is it really serious about this process or is it just playing games?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, as I indicated the other day, when the House is asked to consider proposals for holding a referendum, we want those proposals to reflect a process that is open, fair and democratic. If the bill that will be tabled does not meet all the intended objectives, I imagine members will propose amendments, and the House will deal with them as appropriate. Obviously, if there is a referendum, we want the process to be fair and equitable for all concerned.

The hon. member for Hamilton East said in referring to the spending issue, that there had been equality in this respect during the 1980 referendum. Perhaps I may recall a statement by the hon. Leader of the Opposition on June 30, 1980, in which he said that although the amounts spent by the federal government during the referendum campaign in Quebec were somewhat in excess of normal levels, he did not intend to apologize to anyone for that fact. He was defending an untenable