

*Private Members' Business**[English]*

**Mr. Jesse Flis (Parkdale—High Park):** Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a very great pleasure for me to participate in the private member's motion of the hon. member for Hamilton West. It could not be more timely, especially when we are talking about reforming the rules of the House of Commons and are debating reforming our Canadian Constitution from coast to coast to coast. This topic could not have come at a better time than on the opening day after coming back from the winter break when politicians and Canadians had time to sit back and reflect on what Canada is all about.

Let me share my experience of 40 years ago when I was attending a rural school in Saskatchewan. You know what a rural school was like, Mr. Speaker, where you had grade one to grade ten in one room with 30 students and one teacher. Each morning we were asked to rise and salute the Canadian flag, the kind of flag next to you, Mr. Speaker, which stood in the corner of this rural school house. We had to take an oath of allegiance, a pledge. We had to recite: "I pledge allegiance to this flag and to the country for which it stands, one country indivisible for the benefit of all".

This rural school teacher borrowed a bit of that oath from the U.S. pledge, but she put it into her own words. That pledge stuck with me through my whole life. It instilled in me a love for Canada, a knowledge that this is my country. When I look at that flag, I know I have to fight for the country for which that flag stands if any harm is going to come to it. I will put my life on the line. I grew up with this kind of pledge. I think what is missing in our country are these kinds of oaths of allegiance for elected politicians and for every Canadian.

• (1130)

Just two weeks ago I wrote an open letter to the Special Joint Committee on a Renewed Canada. I urged the committee to look into the possibilities of a pledge that all school children could memorize as they go through our school system. This would give every Canadian something in common, a pledge to be a Canadian, a pledge that states what it means to be a Canadian, and states the duties and responsibilities of being a Canadian.

In all of the constitutional debates taking place across Canada that I am watching very closely, everyone is asking: "What is there for this group? Will the Constitution guarantee this for our region? Will the Constitution guarantee my individual rights?" Nowhere in the Constitution and nowhere in the debates do I hear: "What are my responsibilities as a Canadian citizen?"

Perhaps we should set an example by taking an oath before we take our seat in this House. We have to do that by the parliamentary rules and forms that guide us. In 1979, when I was first elected, I looked at the oath I had to take before taking my seat here. It read: "I, Jesse Flis, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II". I felt uncomfortable with that oath. I took it because I knew the Queen stood for all of Canada. She is the Queen of Canada, so I took it very proudly and obediently, but I felt uncomfortable. There was something missing. Therefore, I read the alternative I could have taken.

By the rules of the House, members who object to being sworn may make a solemn affirmation if the taking of an oath is contrary to their religious belief or if they have no religious belief. That oath or affirmation would say: "I, Jesse Flis, do solemnly, sincerely and truly affirm and declare the taking of an oath is according to my religious belief unlawful and do also solemnly, sincerely and truly affirm and declare that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II".

It is not against my Catholic religion to take an oath. I was uncomfortable with that form also. For 10 years this oath of allegiance has bothered me.

Mr. Speaker, you will recall that I raised a question of privilege in this House when one member took the oath, took his seat in this House and then went across the river and washed his hands of the oath. That should never be allowed. Such a member should not be sitting in this House. The Speaker ruled, and I accepted the Speaker's ruling.

I was very shocked after the member for Hamilton West completed his debate, giving excellent arguments why he wants to preserve our allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and then adding the very vital part which I feel we should all swear before taking our seat: "I will faithfully observe the laws and Constitution of Canada and fulfil my duties as a Canadian citizen". That