

Government Orders

Mr. Gauthier (Roberval): Indeed, you do. If, for the other side, respect of the democratic process is important only when it suits their purpose, Mr. Speaker, then it is time they say so.

I think that, in our country, the results of a democratic consultation should always be binding whatever the consequences. If, on the other side, there are members who think that the results of democratic consultation should not be binding when they do not serve their political interest, then I would urge them to discuss it with the Prime Minister. They seem to have a problem within their caucus. I am not sure the Prime Minister would be proud if he knew that his party members plan to apply referendum results only when they suit them. We take notice of that.

[English]

Mr. Joe McGuire (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to address this amendment, secure in the knowledge that the construction of the fixed link is part of the government's program. All that remains is passage of the resolution to amend the terms of the union between P.E.I. and the Dominion of Canada.

I want to thank my colleague, the hon. member for Cape Breton—East Richmond, the minister of public works. He has been a longstanding advocate and promoter of Atlantic Canada and he earned the gratitude of the vast majority of P.E.I. residents with his strong support for the construction of the fixed link. I have been a supporter of the fixed link since day one, having voted for it in the plebiscite in 1988.

For all members present, I would like to clarify a topic which has just been addressed by the hon. member for Roberval and two other members of the House. Prince Edward Island never had a referendum on the fixed link. Prince Edward Island had a plebiscite on the fixed link. There is a distinct difference between the two. A referendum is binding in law. A plebiscite is not binding.

Premier Ghiz wanted to test how the people of Prince Edward Island felt about the construction of a fixed link. Therefore he called for a plebiscite. It was not binding on him to continue no matter what the result was. All he wanted to do was test public opinion to see whether he should go ahead. If the people of Prince Edward Island at that time had said they did not support the fixed link, he was prepared to endorse the voice of islanders and not proceed.

There was never a referendum taken of the people of Prince Edward Island on the fixed link. If any member opposite or on this side believes it was the case, it never was.

Since the House gave approval to the project last June 15 in Bill C-110, my decision to support the link has been reinforced. Even though link construction is really only in its infancy, one can feel a sense of hope and optimism permeating the island

community. An official in the construction industry had said that the link is not just an economic boost, it is really the only game in town.

I realize that on P.E.I. support for the link was not, is not and probably never will be unanimous. When the plebiscite was held in 1988 the results were 60 per cent to 40 per cent, approximately. Since then support has grown steadily. Recent estimates indicate that it now ranges in the area of 75 per cent to 80 per cent in favour of the fixed link. Every effort was made to provide forums for legitimate opponents of the project to lay before the legislative committee their reasons for opposition.

• (1215)

During the House of Commons legislative committee hearings last March we went to great lengths to promote a balance in witnesses between the proponents of the fixed link and the opponents of the project.

Over 200 new members in the House did not participate in the debates of the 34th Parliament when we passed Bill C-110 which enabled the project to proceed. When the legislation was enacted here we had already gone through the questions raised by the member for Roberval and other members. They are all in the records, whether in the legislative committee record or in the House debates of last March, May and June. Many of the questions being raised today have already been debated and answered to the best of our ability. If hon. members would like to read what transpired in the House when Bill C-110 dealing with the fixed link went through, they should do so.

Today we are mainly concerned with amending the Constitution. The legislation to build a fixed link has already passed. I can understand the curiosity and the questions hon. members are coming up with today.

As I said earlier, despite local opposition in some quarters support among islanders has continued to grow. We are here today to deal with the final legal obstacle, a court ordered constitutional amendment which would allow a fixed link, a bridge, to replace the steam service guaranteed in P.E.I.'s original terms of union. We were ordered to do this by Madam Justice Reed in a 1992 decision.

I want to remind the House in the strongest possible terms that the Government of Prince Edward Island has already endorsed this amendment and has done so unanimously. The federal government, the Government of Prince Edward Island and the Government of New Brunswick have endorsed the project. In effect it is saying yes to Atlantic Canada.

Because of the inefficiencies of the present ferry system the project will allow the federal government to fulfil its responsibilities to provide an adequate transportation-communication service between P.E.I. and the mainland. The project will allow P.E.I. to share in the transportation vision which opened up other