

*Government Orders*

This is legislation which will allow us, when circumstances warrant and when its effect is beneficial, to hold a referendum on constitutional changes.

Of course, this bill, and I emphasize this point, is not part of the amending formula of our Constitution. Neither does it replace the traditional means based on common sense that we used in the past to change the Constitution, that is the consultation, the discussion and the negotiation leading to a consensus, nor does it claim to impute to them other intentions.

The bill is not a substitute for the process I just described. To the contrary. It is another tool we are giving ourselves to try to find long term solutions to constitutional issues by consulting the people and putting to good use the opinions they will express on a given question.

If the situation allows it, the opinions thus expressed by the people could guide us toward a more solid consensus. A referendum would not solve the problem once and for all since it is not binding and has only a consultative value, but it could lead us further on the path toward a settlement of our constitutional differences.

This bill we are reviewing today is a good piece of legislation, which our colleagues in the legislative committee made even better. I will not deal with the policy issues concerning this bill. Rather, I will comment on changes made by the legislative committee.

All the members will remember that the government House leader announced, even before the committee hearings started, that the government was going to offer to set limits on the expenses of the referendum committees and would present an amendment to this effect. The legislative committee adopted an amendment which applies to the registered committees more or less the same rules as the ones political parties have to abide by when it comes to election expenses.

For the year starting April 1, 1992, the limit, just as in the case of a political party, is set at 56.4 cents per voter in the riding where the committee intends to campaign. A clause to this effect was added to the bill so that when a committee applies for registration, it has to state, in the application form signed by its president, in which riding it intends to campaign.

As far as the subsequent question of campaign contributions is concerned, a new disposition of the bill makes it impossible for any registered referendum committee to accept contributions from, first of all, an individual who is not a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident; second, a corporation that does not carry on business in Canada; third, a trade union that does not hold bargaining rights for employees in Canada and, fourth, a foreign government or an agent thereof.

This new clause will guarantee that any consultation of the people will be free of any outside influence. The reason for this provision is crystal clear; it will ensure an even greater fairness.

I would also like you to notice that when a government makes a contribution to a registered referendum committee, this contribution has to appear in the committee's report regarding its expenses and the contributions it received. This improvement also was made by the legislative committee.

The bill was further improved in a number of other areas. Among the very positive improvements, I note the amendment to clause 3 which was approved by all parties in the legislative committee which provides that the text of the question will be available in aboriginal languages. That is a new provision at the federal level; it says that the Chief Electoral Officer shall ensure that the text of a referendum question is available in such aboriginal languages and in such places in those languages as the Chief Electoral Officer, after consultation with representatives of aboriginal groups, may determine.

The bill was again amended in order to allow for better consultation on the question itself. The new subsection 5(2) makes it mandatory to consult about the proposed text at least three days before notice of the motion for approval of the text is given. The government is thus showing that it is open to consultation on any referendum question which could be debated in this House.

That amendment is proof of our willingness to co-operate in the improvement of the process itself and therefore, of the legitimacy of that process.

It is with that same spirit of openness and fairness that we added to the bill a clause which allows members to play a role; it lets them examine the regulations which the Chief Electoral Officer proposes to make to adapt the Canada Elections Act or respecting the conduct of a referendum in general.