

Routine Proceedings

I encourage all Canadians to support the RCMP, not only in these changes but in the leadership it is showing in making policing as a career open to all Canadians.

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River): Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Liberal caucus and the Liberal party, I want to congratulate the Solicitor General for taking a decision that most believe was long overdue, a decision that deals with the RCMP dress code regulations, not just in connection with the Sikh turban but deals also with the uniform worn by female members of the force. In fact, it deals radically with the uniform worn by female members of the force.

I cannot proceed further without noting that it took eight months for the previous Solicitor General to make no decision. It took this Solicitor General two weeks to make a decision. I do not know why this Solicitor General is so speedy, but we do congratulate him for making this decision at this time.

• (1110)

Although it is not the most important issue surrounding that decision, I cannot help but point out that as a result of the procrastination of the Solicitor General, and not of the RCMP because they put in their views last June, there have been many things said and done that we in the House would rather not have heard said and done over the last few months.

I should state that there was really a leadership vacuum and instead of leadership we had a debate which hopefully in the long run will be seen as healthy, although in the short run there was certainly some downside. I want to suggest that there may even be a continuing leadership vacuum in other areas here in this Parliament on the part of the government in dealing with bilingualism, minority language rights, and efforts to ensure progress in the objectives of the Meech Lake Accord.

In any event, without overstating that, I want to point out that we have not changed the stetson as part of the uniform. We have only exempted the wearing of the stetson for religious reasons. That particular exemption is completely consistent with our Charter and I believe with the views of Canadians.

We should not confuse that exemption with multiculturalism. Yes, there is a connection, but I do not think this is the same thing. I apologize to any Dutch Canadians for stereotyping them, but this is not the same as allowing Dutch Canadians to wear wooden shoes as part of the uniform in the RCMP. This is a much different situation; this is a religious exemption.

In conclusion, my party is very pleased to support the decision of the Solicitor General and we look forward to all the benefits that will accrue as a result of that decision.

Mr. John Brewin (Victoria): Madam Speaker, this decision, for which we congratulate the minister, has our complete, firm and unqualified support. It is a correct decision and we are very pleased that the minister has made it and announced as quickly as he has.

I know there are many Canadians who are concerned about this and I want to say to them that I hope they will give this change a chance. It is very important for this country that this step be taken.

It should be understood that the change announced by the minister, as he has referred to it, was required by law. Commissioner Inkster, when he appeared before the justice committee last year, explained the rationale for his recommendation. He said that when he was first asked about this in 1984, he stated that it was not a requirement or that it was not even permitted under the RCMP rules. But when he looked at the law, and particularly the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights, he came to the conclusion that there was no choice, this was a requirement of our law and it must be understood by Canadians to be so.

It is also a tribute to the Sikh community in Canada and to the potential for Sikh Canadians to play a very strong role in our police force and in our armed services. The Sikhs have a long tradition of public service in this area and it is in recognition of this as well that this decision has our support.

Thirdly, this is a very important statement in respect of the government's views and of Parliament's views against racism in this country. I want to pay tribute to the statement made last week by the Prime Minister. I do not often get a chance to do that, but his statement on this issue was a very good statement and one which I