

It goes on in another line: "Plebiscites can help in our self-definition as Canadians". Certainly a lot of us would agree with the member for Etobicoke—Lakeshore.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this very important piece of legislation and support it with some changes that may take place in the committee and ensuing days.

Mr. Howard McCurdy (Windsor—St. Clair): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to address this legislation which has been introduced to provide, and not to assure, the holding of not a referendum, but a plebiscite on the constitutional questions.

The proposal that there should be a plebiscite has been defended on democratic grounds. I think that all Canadians should be cautioned about that argument as presented by a government which has again added to its record of having limited debate more than any other government in history. Let us not look to the government's commitment to democracy as the premise on which we have before us a proposal for a plebiscite.

My party has agreed to support at second reading this legislation in the hope that there will be abundant amendments to it to make it acceptable and to make the process work more effectively and more democratically.

I think that in our enthusiasm for a plebiscite on an issue as complicated as the Constitution some caution should be sounded as to whether this plebiscite and this legislation really will perform in the interests of the two key issues on which it is based, one being Canadian unity and the other that a referendum is the soundest reflection of a functioning democracy.

We have to reflect on the two national referendums that this country has held, one in 1898 on prohibition and the other in 1942 on conscription. I think that all Canadians and this House should be conscious of the fact that the questions that were put then were relatively simple. If one looks at one of the key plebiscites held in this country, namely the referendum of 1980 in Quebec which was on a constitutional issue, that again was a relatively simple question.

We are not dealing with a simple question here. We are dealing with a very complex question. We are dealing

Government Orders

with a whole host of constitutional changes. I think it is edifying to reflect on the process as it has occurred so far which points to the extraordinary complexity of the issues with which we have to deal.

This process really began with that 1980 referendum in Quebec which demonstrates clearly that referendums do not resolve constitutional problems. The reason why we are here today is that the 1980 referendum in Quebec did not resolve the constitutional issue with respect to Quebec. It is 12 years later and we propose another referendum.

More important is that we look at how the immediate process began. That began with a whole host of proposals by the government for constitutional reform, a set of proposals that was never really adequately understood by Canadians but which then became the subject of a special joint committee of this Parliament and as well five conferences on the Constitution.

I participated in all of that. The process involved was one in which people had to commit themselves quite thoroughly to understanding every element in the process. We know that the proposals of the government were changed dramatically by the hearing process of that committee as well as the conferences. Out of those conferences came the proposal for a social covenant and the proposal for a reformed Senate quite different from what was proposed originally by the government.

• (1120)

I do know during that process there was a great deal of difficulty in understanding such questions as distinct society, concurrency and interdelegation.

Yet we may propose to put a question of yes or no to the people on proposals having to do with the Constitution that are part of this long evolutionary process. But it is key in all of this to know that we do not know what will be the outcome of the present first ministers' consultations, what will be put to the people and how well the people understand on what they are voting.

Who will determine the message that is received by the people to which they will answer yes or no? It will come I am sure from the same people who communicated the message about the free trade agreement which was essentially a yes or no question in the last election.