

*Government Orders*

We are at third reading of Bill C-81, the referendum bill. Why are we dealing with a referendum bill today? We must go back to Meech when a premier, by not respecting his signature, created a major constitutional deadlock and the five conditions for Quebec to return to the constitutional fold were not met. As a result, the whole country was in a major impasse.

A year later, the Prime Minister of Canada, decided to try to solve the constitutional problem again. To do so, despite the strong and bitter criticism from many opponents, he created the Beaudoin-Edwards Committee. This committee had a specific purpose: to see how the constitutional amending formula could be changed and also to look into the subject of referendums. We on this committee, chaired by two eminent colleagues, Senator Beaudoin and my fellow member, Mr. Edwards, made the following recommendation: We thought that the federal authorities—

**An hon. member:** They have left.

**Mr. Blackburn (Jonquière):** Indeed, our colleagues have left. We thought that the federal authorities should table a referendum bill in the Canadian Parliament. This referendum would be optional. It would be up to the authorities to use it as required. Given the heterogeneous nature of the country, we thought that the bill should provide for a double majority, a national majority and a majority in each of the four regions.

This referendum would not change the Constitution of Canada. Its result would have a political, not a legal value. It would not bind the two levels of government, but it would send an eloquent message.

• (1610)

That was one of the recommendations of the Beaudoin-Edwards Committee, because it was felt that in case of a deadlock, we would ultimately have to go to the people.

The Prime Minister subsequently appointed a second constitutional committee, the Beaudoin-Dobbie committee, to prepare an in-depth analysis of the changes that would have to be made in the Canadian Constitution to rally the provinces, the First Ministers and the people of Canada around the same set of constitutional proposals.

I had the privilege of working on this committee as well. This is what our committee had to say: "We recommend that a federal law be enacted, if deemed appropriate by the Government of Canada, to enable the federal government, at its discretion, to hold a consultative referendum on a constitutional proposal, either to confirm the existence of a national consensus or to facilitate the adoption of the required amending resolutions".

Both committees recommended that there should be a mechanism, in case of a deadlock, that would allow us to go to the people.

Where are we now? The First Ministers and their representatives met over a period of several weeks and are trying, on the basis of the Beaudoin-Dobbie report's recommendations, to formulate constitutional proposals that will respond to the expectations of all Canadians, not only Quebecers, and of all the provinces.

However, we must still deal with the, perhaps not very palatable but still very real, possibility that we may be faced with a deadlock. If that happens, what is our responsibility as parliamentarians? At the very least, we must ensure legislation is in place that would enable Canadians across the country to say how they see their country and what they want from their country. Under our democratic system, the right of First Ministers to let this country break up because there is a deadlock is superseded by the fundamental right of Canadians to say what they want from their country and whether they agree with the proposed changes.

The government has tabled legislation, Bill C-81, which provides for referendums on the Constitution of Canada. I have examined the bill, and there are many aspects I do not like. For instance, I felt it was very important, in a Canadian referendum, to be able to respect the differences that exist across the country, especially in Quebec, which since 1982 has not been a party to this constitutional agreement and which as a distinct society asked for certain specific powers and got no for an answer as a result of the demise of Meech.

I would have liked to see a double majority, in other words provision in the legislation that requires a majority both across Canada and in each of Canada's four major regions. The west must say yes, Ontario must say yes, the