

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[Translation]

THE CONSTITUTION

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in Calgary the Prime Minister announced, and I was glad to hear it, that he intended to consult Canadians on this country's constitutional future, something we have wanted for a long time. He dismissed the election option, but obviously the other option is a referendum, an option we support. We would like to know from the Acting Prime Minister whether the entire cabinet agrees with the Prime Minister's new position that we should consult Canadians, presumably through some kind of referendum.

Does my friend the Minister of National Health and Welfare agree? Does my friend the President of the Treasury Board agree? Does my friend the Minister of National Defence agree with the Prime Minister on the subject of a Canadian referendum?

• (1420)

[English]

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, the position of the government has been quite clear. It was expressed both by the Prime Minister and by my colleague responsible for constitutional affairs.

The government leaves its options open. We are determined to ensure that Canadians are plugged into the process because we recognize that the Constitution belongs to them. We want to do so in a way that is constructive for Canadians, that does not polarize Canadians and pit one region of Canada against another. All options are open in doing that.

The Liberal Party has shut the door. It has said that the only option that is acceptable to it is a referendum. Our goal is to ensure, in consulting with Canadians and ensuring that Canadians feel as if they have had the chance to participate in the remaking of their Constitution, that we do so in ways that are constructive, healing and unifying in Canada.

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased with the answer of the minister when he said that the Constitution belongs to the people of Canada. There is only one way to have the

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consent of the people of Canada from all parts of Canada. We want an end to confusion.

Two weeks ago the Minister responsible for Constitutional Affairs was for a referendum. Last week when six Pequistes who are members of the Tory caucus objected, he was against it; he was afraid of it. The Prime Minister was not afraid of it yesterday in Calgary.

We want to know from the Acting Prime Minister when the confusion will stop in this government and when the people of Canada will clearly know that they will be consulted on the future of this country.

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, what a very interesting concept. The Leader of the Opposition says that the only way in which Canadians can express themselves, in which they can be consulted, is through a referendum on the Constitution. That is his present position.

I was a member in 1982 of the special committee on the Constitution. The hon. gentleman was responsible in 1981 for the government's position. If the only way in which we can have legitimacy for constitutional reform is a referendum, why didn't he do it?

Mr. David Dingwall (Cape Breton—East Richmond): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the same minister.

Yesterday, speaking in Calgary, the Prime Minister ruled out the possibility of a general election on the Constitution. He said that the government is considering at least four options.

I want to ask the minister: If one of the four options currently under consideration is a national referendum, why will the government not introduce legislation that would make that possible? Why does it want to hide its intentions from members of Parliament and from the people of Canada?

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, far from hiding our intentions from the people of Canada and from Parliament, the government has been abundantly clear in indicating that all options are open.

We have one goal, and that is a united Canada with a renewed Constitution. What we want to do in terms of choosing a methodology to get there is to choose methods of plugging the people in and having them involved which are unifying and which bring Canadians together.