

The Address

party, which in its creation was regional, might have by his leadership the possibility of becoming a true national party. In doing so it would be in the interest of the unity of Canada and the continuity of a strong and united Canada from sea to sea to sea.

• (1725)

[Translation]

Finally, I want to congratulate all those who have been elected in the last election. Our responsibilities as parliamentarians are obviously significant but the most difficult test to pass is sometimes, in fact always, the election test. And everyone here deserves to be congratulated for having passed this test. I for one would like to thank my constituents from Papineau—Saint-Michel who, for the ninth time, have given me their trust and have allowed me to sit again in the Parliament of Canada.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Ouellet: Let me tell you where I stand in relation to the Leader of the Opposition, who speaks with conviction but whose argument in this debate I cannot accept. While he wants to build a new country, I want to improve mine. It appears to me that his approach is as sincere as mine. Like me, he comes from a Quebec rural area; he is from Lac-Saint-Jean, I am from Saint-Pascal-Kamouraska, in the Lower St. Lawrence region. My father was a country doctor, my grandfather a farmer. I studied in French. In this country of mine, I gained many times the trust and respect of a majority of people who do not speak my language, who do not share my culture and whose traditions are not the same as mine.

Although part of the minority, I was able to work and assume responsibilities without any difficulty in this country. The Leader of the Opposition himself once assumed very important responsibilities within a Canadian government. He himself agreed to represent his country, that is, Canada, overseas. He was even called "Excellency" and he did not complain. This is to say that this country is a country of great tolerance, compassion and opportunities for everyone who wants to take advantage of what it has to offer.

The Leader of the Opposition is a clever speaker. Listening to his argument, I have noticed that he knows how to skip details and caricature the facts.

There is no doubt that when he referred to the Meech Lake Accord and to the Charlottetown Agreement, he not once reminded us that the Parti québécois, which is the head office of the Bloc Québécois, did not want to see the Meech Lake Accord nor the Charlottetown Agreement passed. At no time. I accept that some people may wish that all possible powers be granted to a State, a country separated and independent from Canada, but, please, do not make us believe that the Meech Lake Accord or the Charlottetown Agreement would have satisfied the Bloc Québécois or the Parti Québécois.

• (1730)

So do not accuse those who might have been against the Meech Lake Accord of being traitors to Quebec. Many things have been said about the Prime Minister who had reservations and objections regarding certain aspects of the Meech Lake Accord.

Why would it be more serious for the Prime Minister, Mr. Chrétien, who was an ordinary Canadian at the time, to oppose Meech? Why would he be less of a Quebecer than Mr. Parizeau, who was also against the accord?

In fact, it is obvious that we will never agree in this political debate. As the Leader of the Opposition reminded us, for thirty years some people have been desperately trying to convince Quebecers that they would be better off if they separated from the rest of Canada.

Now I want to remind the members across the way, not those sitting at both ends but those in the middle, that during all that time they have been able to benefit from our democratic system, of the Canadian federal system, to express their point of view, to put forward their arguments in the greatest respect of democracy and of individual opinion.

It is an exceptional situation that does not exist in every country in the world. A few moments ago, I heard the Leader of the Opposition make a comment. The only reason I am mentioning this is because he himself talked about it, and I will be careful since I do not want the media to quote me incorrectly. He said that a number of Central European and East European countries had gained their independence, their national sovereignty, so why would it not be Quebec's turn to do the same. He knows full well the answer to that question.

In my capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs, I had the opportunity to discuss with representatives from all those East European and Central European countries at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. How many of those people—whether they be from Croatia, from Georgia or from other regions of Europe that just became independent—how many of those people would give up their newly-gained independence to become citizens of the province of Quebec in Canada? They would be very happy to be Canadians.

The Leader of the Opposition has the habit of always going back to the 1981 referendum to claim that it is our Prime Minister who, at that time, had—and I can quote him since I took notes—"led the assault against Quebec". Why would he have led the assault against Quebec? The hon. member for Saint-Maurice was simply defending Canada. He was not against Quebec, he was for Canada. Today, many people consider it important and useful to defend Canada.

The Leader of the Opposition makes another error when he tells us that Quebecers will finally have the opportunity to vote for the status quo or for sovereignty in the next referendum. He does not recognize the reality of Canadian federalism when he talks about the status quo. Canadian federalism evolves