

*Government Orders*

The legislation as put forward is a precautionary measure in the mind of the government because of the negotiations that are taking place. As was noted on April 14 of this year by the Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affairs when he spoke about the consultative process, he said:

If at the end of May, there is not a substantial consensus on the Canada round we would intend to go to Parliament with a federal proposal which we hope would secure the support of the two opposition parties. If that support were not there, we would proceed alone. Parliamentary approval of that package might be followed by a national plebiscite, whose purpose would be to secure the agreement of the people of Canada, in effect, to reach around those premiers who did not agree.

Carrying on with that particular objective, the Prime Minister was quoted in *The Toronto Star* on April 9, 1992 as saying:

My position is: If the provincial premiers cannot agree on constitutional proposals that would be put to the people, then the federal government, with the other federalist parties in the House of Commons, brings forward proposals and causes these proposals to be put to the people.

I think that all Canadians would want the federal government to be in a position of moving forward with a referendum in what I guess would really be considered a plebiscite to let them have their say.

• (1110)

The over-all objective is to ensure that there is every means of success in this Canada round. I know that is also the intent and in the minds of most other members of Parliament in this House, I am sure all except those who want to break up Canada. Certainly we would want to have a referendum that will not interfere with any right of any province to hold its own referendum. That is certainly the intent of this legislation. It must be characterized by fairness so that all points of view are expressed and considered, and the element of fairness must be there when we go to the people with a referendum.

Certainly it is a serious step and it must not be taken lightly. It is a very serious step and I think all members of this House would agree with that. The current process of the Canada round has been long. It has been somewhat painful at times. Nonetheless, it has been an important journey for Canada as we have carried on with these consultations.

As the House will recall, first there was the citizens' forum, next there was the Beaudoin—Edwards committee on the amending formula, then there was the Beaudoin—Dobbie review of the federal government's constitutional proposals, and a series of national conferences that followed. Now under way and nearing completion is the multilateral process involving the federal government, nine provincial governments, two territories, and leaders of the major aboriginal groups. Whatever other successes we have had, whatever this consultative exercise may yield, it will eliminate the possibility of anyone ever daring to impose a contrived sense of what Canada is.

Resolving the constitutional issue in a positive, modern way is what we all would like to see happen. National referendums, of course, have been held only a few times in Canada, and certainly a number of times in the provinces. There have been two national referendums, as we know, the first of course being in 1898 and one in 1942 on conscription. Certainly national referendums are something that in very important cases like this clearly are needed.

It should be noted that through the years individual members of Parliament have brought forward private members' legislation in connection with holding referendums and they have not been very successful in doing that. Most recently, in the fall of 1989, the member from Etobicoke brought forward a private member's bill, Bill C-257. Certainly he has carried on in his mind that holding a referendum or plebiscite is something for which there should be legislation in place. We should commend the member from Etobicoke for his foresight and his action in that area.

In a recent article written by the member for Etobicoke—Lakeshore he wrote: "I emphasize that not every issue has to be put to the people. The main work of enacting laws, resolving issues and debating public concerns must continue in our elected and deliberative legislative bodies. Direct voting in a referendum or plebiscite is such a special democratic device that it ought not to be trivialized or overused. Perhaps every decade or maybe once in the life of each Parliament, one or two topics of overriding national importance should be subjected to the fullest expression of popular opinion".