according to its forecast at the time, by now the deficit should be less than $20 billion. However, we all know that this year the deficit will probably go over $30 billion.

I understand the minister's concern about trying to find ways for government to reduce its operating costs. Many of the votes we were discussing today, for instance, involve statutory requirements representing up to 70 per cent of the vote.

[*English*]

I understand the problem of the minister. I understand the problem of the government.

When I talk about reform of this place I think the nature of opposition has to be looked at. The automatic knee-jerk reaction to everything proposed by the government is bad. Very little support for most initiatives of government is an inheritance of the British parliamentary system where all members on one side vote one way and most members on the other side vote another way. I think it is something that needs to be questioned.

I want to address the problem that was raised by the minister in terms of how we deal with some of the initiatives of the government designed to reduce expenditures. This is where I think we run into a problem with the off-loading.

• (1630)

Fundamental to any hope of re-establishing fiscal integrity is a tripartite national conference involving the federal government, the provincial ministers of finance and the municipalities. I do not think there is any future for the country in terms of dealing with the $700 billion we have in the public debt without sitting down in a very serious and structured way to deal with the problem of national public debt.

To exclude the city of Toronto and to include New Brunswick, to exclude the city of Montreal and to include Manitoba, to exclude the growing, burgeoning city of Vancouver and to include Prince Edward Island in my view in talking seriously about tax reform is nonsense.

Perhaps the minister will take this as a suggestion, as would any government that wants to be serious about debt reduction and eventually the elimination of the deficit. It is childish to speak about reducing the debt so long as we are running a deficit. I do not care how we apply funds or what jargon we use.

The member for Mississauga North was chairman of the finance committee at the time the mayor of Vancouver, the first time I heard the proposal put forward, talked about the implications of off-loading. Just changing responsibilities from one level of government to another will not change anything.

One recommendation I would make is to develop a program, a beginning, not call people in, put on the television lights and have them posture about who are the good guys, who are the bad guys, who is paying the price, how municipal infrastructure needs to be paid for, and all the rest of it. All the people who represent the interests of the taxpayers—whether federal, provincial or municipal the tax bill goes to the same taxpayer—should sit down together to find out how we can deal with what people perceive, other than lack of jobs, as being the single most important problem in the country, that is the fiscal morass we are into with the debt and the deficit.

One recommendation would be for a national conference on debt management involving the three levels of government.

Mr. Howard McCurdy (Windsor—St. Clair): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to have an opportunity to speak on the last supply day in debate on the government's estimates. Quite frankly this is the dying gasp of a tired government. For eight years or nearly nine the government has pursued a neo-conservative agenda which has been expressed in a variety of ways and has caused a great deal of harm to our country. It has created great doubts about the future of the nation, caused a great deal of unemployment and caused a great deal of misery. Increasingly there are indications of civil strife as expressed by the demonstration that took place on the Hill last Saturday.

There is a preoccupation, not an unreasonable preoccupation, with the deficit. However, one thing all of us here and across the nation ought to recognize is that the deficit is a specific result of an over-all thrust, an ideological thrust imposed upon this nation. It has been the borrowing of a neo-conservative perspective best represented by George Bush, Margaret Thatcher and the Prime Minister which says that government is best that does the least, most particularly that government is best that does the least for the vast majority of people in favour of allowing transnational corporations to go