

Oral Questions

From cover to cover we talk about doing business differently in the armed forces. We talk about ending project management. We did in the last budget. We talk about buying equipment off the shelf. We talk about contracting out to the private sector a number of functions that are already being performed internally. We think we can do them much more cheaply. We have even mused about privatizing the operation and maintenance of the search and rescue function with Department of National Defence crews.

If the hon. member reads the report over the weekend I do not think he would ask this type of question on Monday.

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CONFERENCE ON SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION

Mr. John O'Reilly (Victoria—Haliburton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs will be in Budapest next week to attend the Conference on Security and Co-Operation in Europe. What does Canada hope to accomplish at this summit, in particular concerning the crisis in the former Yugoslavia?

Mr. Jesse Flis (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the purpose of the upcoming CSC summit in Budapest is to enhance security and respect for human rights in Europe.

Canada would also like the summit to broaden the CSC's capacity to prevent and resolve conflicts, notably by giving it the ability to establish or monitor peacekeeping operations. The conflict in former Yugoslavia, including recent events in the Bihac area of Bosnia will be of primary concern to the heads of state and government.

In support of an eventual comprehensive political settlement to the conflict, the summit could and should offer CSC expertise in areas such as human rights, elections monitoring, the protection of minorities, arms control, and confidence building measures.

Canada's voice at previous summits, conferences, and general meetings has always been listened to and highly respected.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Mrs. Sharon Hayes (Port Moody—Coquitlam, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Justice and relates to a recent directive given by the Canadian Human Rights Commission to its tribunals.

Apparently they have been ordered to hear four complaints of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, three of which pertain to same sex spousal benefits.

Why has the minister allowed such a directive when the legislation to amend the act to include sexual orientation has not even been introduced in the House, never mind been approved by the will of the people? Is this just another example of ignoring the genuine concerns of Canadians, including some members of his own party?

Hon. Allan Rock (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should understand that the human rights commission is an independent body which is not under the control or direction of the government or any minister thereof.

• (1145)

The commission is obligated by law to make up its own mind based on its own investigation and the exercise of its own independent judgment with respect to those matters to refer to tribunals for hearing. We would not want it any other way. There must be independence.

While she may ask me as the minister responsible to the House for the Human Rights Act and its administration to speak to matters of structure or of the human rights system, I do not direct the commission in what decisions to make or what matters to undertake in terms of hearings.

Mrs. Sharon Hayes (Port Moody—Coquitlam, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for that response. I do feel the minister has made it clear he is convinced that there is wide support for this issue.

I challenge the minister today, as he is unwilling to challenge the Human Rights Commission, will he not agree if he thinks there is so much support to allow a free vote on this issue so that the real will of the people on this issue can be expressed?

Hon. Allan Rock (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is a separate question and I understand it is separate. I am prepared to deal with that as a matter for which I am responsible, that is to say whether the Human Rights Act should be amended to add certain words. That is my responsibility.

We are dealing with commitments made by the Prime Minister and by me, not so much based on polling for support but based on principles and what is right, on fundamental justice.

The amendment which is under discussion has to do with adding sexual orientation as a ground on which discrimination is prohibited. I would have thought that on that principle, that is to say whether discrimination should be prohibited against somebody only on the basis of their sexual orientation, there is not much debate.