

Government Orders

I appreciate what he said about the detailed study of this bill which took place in committee. I did a totalling of the hours in committee and it sat in excess of 18 hours over three days. It heard from the Minister and the Deputy Minister of Justice and later on from the three expert witnesses. Finally, there was the long day of 11 virtually uninterrupted hours doing the clause by clause study. He contributed an immense amount to the success of the bill in committee.

The hon. member referred to the NDP members' position on this bill and like him, I respect their position. But I am a little sorrowful about it because it gives the appearance the NDP members may be opposed to the holding of a referendum although we know that is not their intention. I wonder if he might undertake to use his good offices to persuade his neighbours to perhaps change their minds between now and 4.45 p.m. when we vote.

On the questions of substance on the Liberal position, I wonder if my hon. friend could comment a little further on the four regional majorities idea his party has advocated consistently for some time. Beaudoin-Dobbie advocated there be a consulted referendum but without regional majorities. My friend and I worked on a committee the previous year that recommended those majorities. He will recall there were provinces that immediately rejected the idea and said it violated the idea of provincial equality. They said it moved in the direction of regions on which this country was not built.

I wonder if he would comment on the positions of Alberta and Newfoundland in particular on that issue and on the more recent development that British Columbia regards itself as a fifth region. Has he consulted with his colleague and desk mate from Vancouver Quadra on that issue to learn what the British Columbia position would be?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois): Order please. I must interrupt the hon. speaker because many other speakers want to raise questions to the hon. member.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ouellet: Mr. Speaker, I would be glad to answer the hon. member's question and to explain very briefly why we are talking about regional majority in this country.

You have to acknowledge that Canada is one of the most decentralized countries there is. Throughout the years, provincial premiers have gained in importance and

influence like none of their counterparts elsewhere in the world. You just have to compare the influence of a provincial premier with that of a governor in the United States to see how our premiers have become omnipresent and important in our political process. It has reached a stage where it took us almost 50 years to patriate the Canadian Constitution. Why? Because at the federal-provincial conferences, the Prime Minister of Canada could never reach an agreement with the premiers, who were just trying to get benefits for their own province, always to the detriment of the central government.

We, in the Liberal Party think that to leave the final decision to the people is one way to put an end to this inevitable trench war between the Prime Minister and the premiers. It is only natural that a premier would defend the interests of his province and demand the best for his people at a federal-provincial conference, but what is best for his province is not necessarily what is best for the whole country.

• (1230)

That is why we think that if we ask the people, all Canadians as Canadians, to vote on this question and if we get a majority in each of the major regions of the country, then the will and the common sense of the people will prevail, not the provincial or regional interests of the premiers.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Ste. Marie): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member told us this bill was not legally binding and that it was merely consultative. Many members on the government side have told us the same thing. It is what we were told in 1942, before the referendum on conscription. The Prime Minister at the time used a crystal ball and consulted his dog before making decisions.

Mrs. Venne: It was Mackenzie King.

Mr. Duceppe: Perhaps they were better than our Prime Minister's current advisers, who in many cases are the same people who advised the former Prime Minister, Mr. Trudeau.

I get the impression the purpose of this referendum is to sabotage the Quebec process. Time allocation is being used to restrict debate on this bill, but the hon. member says "I will support it, although I have a number of reservations". His party did not support Meech Lake, especially his leader with his "thank you, Clyde", as he said, although that exercise was supposed to save Canada. They had reservations, and they did not support Meech. I fail to see the logic in all this.