

Private Members' Business

United States of America celebrates George Washington's birthday. Cyprus, Bolivia, Burma, Guyana, and the Dominican Republic all celebrate a day in February, either in recognition of their independence, as a way to celebrate the founding of those countries, or as a way to celebrate their heritage.

In my view, we are not alone in trying to set aside a day in February in order to celebrate our heritage and in order to appreciate what we have around us.

I stand before this House to say that we, in the Liberal Party, in the 1988 election pledged that, if we formed the government, we would make sure a day in February was set aside as a national holiday. We are on the record in support of Canadians taking a day of rest in order to reflect on what Canada is all about and the fact that here in Canada you can be anything you want to be, Mr. Speaker, providing you appreciate the fact that we live in one of the best countries in the land. That is what Canada is all about.

I am not going to spend a lot of time trying to talk about the pros of it, because, as I indicated, there is an agreement on this issue from all sides of the House. It is my hope that the legislation will be adopted by the government, that we can move forward to enact this legislation into law, and that we can get on with it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Luc Joncas (Matapédia—Matane): Mr. Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to take part in the debate today on second reading of Bill C-288, an Act respecting National Heritage Day, and especially, Mr. Speaker, because this proposal may have a major impact on Canadians as a whole.

As citizens of this country, we have a right to be proud of our historical and cultural heritage and the major contribution made by men and women who, over the years, helped to make this country what it is today. We also have a right to be proud of our origins, our language and our family and religious traditions. Together, these values reflect not only our ties with the past but also our admiration for those who made that past.

Considering the profound changes taking place within our society, I believe it is imperative that governments and, in fact, each and everyone of us, make a conscious effort to preserve our history and our cultural identity. In fact, many of the problems confronting our country today are caused by ignorance, carelessness and a lack of tolerance for the cultures of others.

Mr. Speaker, I don't think the question is whether Canadians should emphasize the wealth of their heritage but how we should go about it. For instance, if we support the underlying objectives of this bill, I think we must ask some very serious questions about the economic and social impact.

Adding another holiday at the national level would have a considerable impact on productivity. The ensuing loss of productivity would be about 0.4 per cent of our Gross National Product or about \$2.56 billion. Considering the present state of the economy, it is something we should think twice about.

This amount does not, of course, include the additional funds required to promote this day across the country and any other funds the government will have to commit to related support activities. Briefly, creating a National Heritage Day, in addition to having a very serious economic impact, might seriously undermine the credibility of a government that, in a recession, is encouraging Canadian businesses to be more productive.

But there is more, Mr. Speaker. I must point out that the passage of Bill C-288 would not in any way commit the provincial governments any more than it commits employers whose businesses are not subject to the Canada Labour Code. This means that a meagre 8 per cent of the Canadian workforce would be able to take advantage of this measure and take the day off on this national heritage day.

In other words, initially, the measure would be unfair to the majority of the workforce. We must therefore consider whether this type of measure is reasonable.

The bill before the House today may create some confusion, because a number of provinces like Alberta and Quebec already have holidays whose themes are very similar to that of a heritage day. I am referring here to Heritage Day, celebrated on the first Monday of August, and Family Day, celebrated on the third Monday of February in Alberta. Although Quebec does not have its own heritage holiday, the fact remains that "La Saint-Jean" is steeped in the love of our heritage.