

*Government Orders*

I congratulate the Prime Minister, not only on bringing this in, but having the imagination at this time of great crisis in the country to be prepared to look at new models, to recognize that there are faults in all of us and that we are only going to be able to make the most of this extraordinary country if we recognize some of those faults and are prepared to adopt new ways of defining together the nature of the country.

Along with a number of other members—

[*Translation*]

I must add something because my friend, the hon. member for Shefford, used the word “intolerance”. He was the only one to use it in this debate. He thinks the public hearings will indicate a feeling of intolerance across Canada. I doubt it but we will see.

I think this process will reveal neither intolerance nor hatred but a much more positive attitude toward Canada by citizens from Quebec and Alberta among others. He does not agree with me at the moment, but I intend to wait for the process to indicate what Canadians really think.

• (1650)

I am convinced that Canadians want a country known for its tolerance.

[*English*]

Mr. Speaker, with a number of other members, I celebrated—one is never sure whether it was an honour the other night—the eighteenth anniversary of my election to the House of Commons. I have to say that in that period of time, and in the time in which I was honoured to work in public life before that, I do not think there has ever been a period in which one could be less certain about what would happen to this country, or, indeed, the challenges that were facing the nation were greater than they are now.

I have had the privilege over that time to take part in the great national debates that have shaped the country. I had the privilege, along with others who were in the House, who are in the House now with the Prime Minister, to take part directly and personally in the debate in Quebec during the referendum.

I have had the opportunity, sometimes uncomfortably, to have to defend the politics of national unity, to have to defend the Official Languages Act and other instruments across the country. I have done that with pride.

I think we are now at a time in which there has been quite a profound change in the attitudes of Canadians towards the country. Let me speak for my part of the country. I believe that the reaction in my part of the country to the Meech process was that there were opponents there, large numbers of opponents.

I believe at the end of the day they were, in fact, not opposed to the idea of a distinct society. There will always be some in western Canada who worry about that view and there will always be people there who seek to exploit them. But I think that that was not the principal concern at the end. At the end it was a concern of process. I think people did genuinely feel that the process that had worked for years excluded them, that there was something wrong with the institution of federal-provincial relations.

Certainly in my part of the country there is a profound sense that there is something wrong with our parliamentary institutions, more the other place than ours, but both our places, a sense that these institutions do not reflect the real requirements of a country that has become, among other things, much more educated, much more sophisticated, in which people have a much greater capacity to take decisions themselves as to the future of the country.

By the failure of the Meech Lake process, there was brought into sharp focus, in western Canada at least, a profound dissatisfaction with the way the country works; not a dissatisfaction with Canada, but a dissatisfaction with the way the country works. To any of us who have had the privilege of being acquainted with Quebec, that part of Canada, there was a profound disappointment at the rejection of Meech Lake, and some sense that Canada had turned away from Quebec.

I thought that one of the most important questions that was posed in the immediate aftermath of Meech Lake was a question posed, not by a member of this House, but by the Liberal Prime Minister of the province of Quebec. He made the observation—I believe it was on the floor of the National Assembly of Quebec, that for a long time the question had been, “What does Quebec want?”. Now the question is, “What does Canada want?”.