

Oral Questions

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, the minister avoided answering my question on constitutional offers, but in any case I will proceed with my supplementary question for the same minister.

As he pointed out, the Government of Quebec has made it clear that it will seek another referendum on sovereignty in spite of the fact that in the last referendum it never did make a detailed proposal on sovereignty and the proposed economic partnership.

Before the next referendum will the federal government formally request that the Government of Quebec table its detailed proposals for sovereignty and future economic relations with the rest of Canada so that Quebecers and other Canadians can evaluate the credibility of the ideas?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we will respect the current referendum which indicated that Quebecers want changes to be made and that they want the changes to be made within Canada.

I will repeat what the Prime Minister said yesterday in the House.

[Translation]

"I never said we were going to change the Constitution. I said we were going to make changes to the federation, constitutional changes, if necessary".

That is what we are working on. We will make recommendations to the Prime Minister, and we hope to be able to find solutions that will ensure, once again, that Canada remains as we know it, a united country, a country where we can all make our dreams and aspirations come true, whether we live in Quebec or in another province.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, these are good words but they continue to miss the point, which is that the Government of Quebec is not interested in such plans and will proceed with another referendum at some point.

Let me go back to the Government of Canada's own commitments. On October 25, 1995 in a speech to the entire nation the Prime Minister said:

All governments, federal and provincial, must respond to the desire of Canadians everywhere for greater decentralization.

This was a commitment to all Canadians that the Government of Quebec simply could not reject on behalf of everybody.

As the government has done nothing but bash decentralization since the referendum, what specifically do the Prime Minister and the government have in mind in making this kind of a commitment?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on this very important question I can only repeat what our line has been. It has been that decentralization would happen only when it is shown very clearly that it is more efficient to transfer responsibilities from one level of government to another.

It will be decentralization if it well serves Canadian citizens who pay taxes, but there is no doubt that decentralization for its own sake is not a remedy to any of the problems we now have.

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[Translation]

PUBLIC SERVICE

Mr. René Laurin (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Finance.

In his budget speech, the Minister of Finance announced that compensation packages for laid-off public servants would cost approximately \$1.3 billion. But the annual financial statement tabled by the government shows a huge cost overrun, with costs up to \$2.3 billion.

• (1430)

How can the government explain the fact that its public service downsizing programs have cost \$1 billion more than anticipated?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance and Minister responsible for the Federal Office of Regional Development—Quebec, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the President of the Treasury Board were here, I am sure that, in response to the member's question, he would say that this increase can be attributed, first, to the pension funds that were not factored in when preparing the budget since they were not included in budget projections and, second, to the fact that more employees have accepted the offer earlier than expected. These costs will be recovered in time.

Mr. René Laurin (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is surprising to say the least that the President of the Treasury Board never mentioned anything about this to the Minister of Finance. In view of the finance minister's answer, I might add that one of these public service downsizing programs, the early retirement program, which was supposed to affect 4,000 employees and cost \$300 million, attracted 1,500 more people than expected and ended up costing \$800 million instead of the original \$300 million, or almost three times more than expected.

How can the government explain that its early retirement program will end up costing almost three times more than expected?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance and Minister responsible for the Federal Office of Regional Development—Quebec, Lib.): First of all, Mr. Speaker, as I just said, this is explained, in the one hand, by the fact that some employees have agreed to retire sooner than anticipated and, on