ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[*English*]

THE ECONOMY

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I am happy that we are all back in the House of Commons today. I want to welcome members back from a summer that gave us the chance to travel throughout the country. I have had the pleasure of going from Victoria, B.C. to St. John's, Newfoundland.

I would like to ask a question of the Prime Minister. Will he agree that this House of Commons will resume, as scheduled, normal sitting on September 21, so that we can deal with the economic problems of this nation? Or is the government planning to postpone the economic affairs of this nation for another two months?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, we are back to deal with the Constitution. When that matter is resolved, and I think my hon. friend will agree with me that it is rather important, the attention of the House will no doubt turn to other matters.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, during my travels this past summer, I met with workers, businessmen and fishermen and everyone spoke about economic problems. Only when I was through talking with those people would the reporters ask me questions about the Canadian Constitution.

What I want to ask the Prime Minister is this: Why could we not sit as usual on September 21 and debate the economic problems during the referendum campaign? We were able to do both in 1980.

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, it will depend on the will of the House. I know that a large number of members from all political parties have expressed the wish to take part in the referendum debate in their own ridings.

I believe that the hon. member for Papineau said the other day that he would prefer the House to adjourn to October 27. I could be wrong as I do not have the text before me; I shall have to look at it more closely.

In any case, we are entring a major referendum debate which will involve all members of Parliament. They will probably want to take part in the debate in their own ridings. However, it is up to the Leader of the Opposition to suggest other alternatives.

[*English*]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian people want us to deal with the other problems of the nation while we are debating the Constitution.

In fact, if we create the impression that the government or the Prime Minister want to avoid taking responsibility for the economy for another two months, Canadians might be very disappointed and refuse to be as nice as they should be on the constitutional matter.

The unemployed of this country want this government to change its economic policies right now so that they can have jobs and respect. When will the government do something about the economy? That is what they want to know.

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, Canadians generally recognize that variables cannot be isolated. You cannot put the Constitution over here and the economy over here. They are very closely co-mingled. Economic recovery in Canada depends in very substantial measure on a successful resolution of our constitutional problems.

● (1420)

There are people who will be opposing this deal; not because it has imperfections, because it does and that is fair ball, but others will be opposing the deal because they want to dismantle Canada. It is important that we all be out there, not only defending the deal to the extent humanly possible, but defending Canada as well.

I do not think that Canadians will hold it against us if we deal first and foremost for the next four weeks with resolving the constitutional issue once and for all and then turning our full attention as a united nation toward the question of the economy.

Hon. Herb Gray (Windsor West): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has said that the Constitution and the economy are co-mingled.

If that is correct, I ask the Prime Minister this. Why does he treat them as mutually exclusive, as an either/or question? Why does he not agree that while we are