

perhaps on certain social aspects as well, as a result of these major changes.

In any case, I think that instead of hurrying things along, the government should dig a little deeper and be in a position to give us better assurances that these issues have been given the attention they deserve. If there are any problems with this bridge, it will not be the people from Ontario or Ottawa, or Montreal or Vancouver who are affected, but local people, in an area that is economically fragile and has a low population density. Yes, a megaproject in this sector may have some very positive effects if the project is a good one, but it might also have a negative impact if we do not bother to look at all sides of the problem because we are in too much of a hurry to get this on the road.

• (1150)

As for the environmental issues, I think they were disposed of a bit quickly. I have a feeling that we tried to meet this deadline by putting some pressure on the stakeholders. For the time being, what I want to do is register my concern in this respect.

Financing is the biggest concern for this project. The cost of this bridge—which is clearly a megaproject—is estimated at \$850 million. It would not be the first time that on a project of this magnitude, and for which we have no precedents, there would be cost overruns.

Already, according to my information, a study by Wood-Gordon revealed, last year, that the cost could be about \$1.3 billion. Today—faced with a rather innovative project for which experts have already said that the cost could be at least 50 per cent higher—how can we say with any degree of certainty that the cost will be \$850 million?

I do not want to use this argument to block the project, but I am trying to point out to this House, the government and the hon. members on the other side, that it would not be the first time in this country that the cost of a megaproject balloons way beyond the government's initial estimates, and that the government is stuck with the deal and forced to pay, at taxpayers' expense, millions of dollars more to finish the project.

I do not think that we can conclude this debate without the minister being present, and he is not in the House right now.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Kilger):** I wish to remind hon. members that it is our tradition not to make any comments on the absence of a member. We all know that hon. members are very busy. I just wish to remind hon. members that they should not comment on the absence of another member.

### *Government Orders*

**Mr. Gauthier (Roberval):** Mr. Speaker, I am willing not to mention the absence of the member but I would like to know if someone opposite can answer the questions that we are asking.

If the issue is worth debating, it would be important to have a valid speaker to respond to these concerns. Let me remind you that the role of Parliament is really to allow members of Parliament to express opinions on projects.

I think that the motion before us today is aimed at seeking the co-operation of the opposition parties. A number of speeches that were made until now are asking for that support. That support is being given, but—and this is important—the people responsible should at least try and respond to our concerns.

I agree not to mention the absence or presence of a member, but I certainly wish, and I know I am complying with the Standing Orders, that someone could give us an answer and listen to us in order to be able to give details and explanations on this matter.

Therefore, I will go back to the financing issue. It would not be the first time in this country that a project costs more than expected. How does the government intend to finance cost overruns, if any? I suppose that a responsible government has thought of something. If this is the case, I would like to know about it and we would like to know who will take over the responsibilities if the project is a disaster in terms of construction. It is important for us to know that.

• (1155)

Mr. Speaker, you will appreciate that there was a time when the financial situation of the government was sound and perhaps those questions were less important. But when the government is preparing to cut social programs and health care programs, or any other program for that matter, because money is tight, because our deficit is over \$40 billion a year, we have reasons to be concerned with this issue at this point. Surely the government has thought of some way to overcome cost overruns, if any, and they have to explain what their intentions are.

We are also concerned with maintenance. I did not come across any estimates in the documents made available to us. They probably exist, but I did not find them. I would like the government to answer the following: What are the estimated costs for the maintenance of this structure each year? Would the costs be paid for by the consortium that will be in charge of bridge management? Have any maximum costs been established? If the maintenance costs are higher than expected or if there are major problems, who will pay the tab? Will the government take some responsibility then or will the promoters deal with the unexpected costs and other potential risks? It would be important to know about that.