

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[*Translation*]

THE CONSTITUTION

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Prime Minister.

We are delighted the government has finally agreed it is essential to consult Canadians on the Constitution and realize that the Constitution does not belong to politicians or to bureaucrats but to the people of this country.

I want to ask the Prime Minister whether he will confirm in the House that the Minister of National Health and Welfare was speaking on behalf of the government this morning when he announced there would soon be a referendum bill before the House.

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): I did not hear the minister's statement this morning, Mr. Speaker, but the government's position is the one I expressed when I said the following:

[*English*]

"That is what the right hon. member for Yellowhead and I and the rest are working so hard on. We hope and we expect that we will succeed in that initiative". That is the initiative that involves the provinces. "Should we not be able to, then I would want to examine with the leaders of the House other alternatives. At the appropriate time, that could be a number of things".

We are pursuing the activity with the provinces and hope to succeed, but should that not be successful. I will of course consult at an appropriate time with the leaders of the House and we will take appropriate action on behalf of Canada.

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask a supplementary question of the Prime Minister.

Would it not be more appropriate at this time to make it a policy of the government that it will consult the people of Canada rather than the possibility of a referendum as a club over the head of the premiers?

If we recognize that the Constitution belongs to the people of Canada, why not come clean with the people

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of Canada and say that at last they will decide what kind of constitution we will have in Canada and every Canadian will have something to say about it?

Right Hon. Joe Clark (President of the Privy Council and Minister responsible for Constitutional Affairs): Mr. Speaker, the government has been on the record since the throne speech with regard to consultation with the public. We intend to honour that undertaking. We will be indicating at the appropriate time how that will be done.

If I may, I want to correct what may be a misunderstanding that the Leader of the Opposition has about the agreement that was reached between myself on behalf of the federal government and the provinces and territories when we met on March 12. We are all committed to a best efforts attempt to get an agreement among the governments as to the constitutional position that we should take forward and that can resolve the several urgent issues facing Canada.

• (1420)

It is understood by the premiers and by the territories that if that process does not work, there will then be a requirement for the federal government to take its own action. That is understood by the premiers, understood by the territories, and no one believes that there is any threat hanging over the head of provincial or territorial governments. That is not the way we operate.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I would like to direct a question on the same subject to the Minister responsible for Constitutional Affairs.

Last night, while I was watching television, I was glad to see—for the second time—a commercial sponsored and paid for by the government with taxpayers' money, which said that the Beaudoin-Dobbie report was a very good report. I thought that was very interesting, but how can the minister explain to Quebecers that the government is using taxpayers' money to promote the Beaudoin-Dobbie report when the day before yesterday the minister of defence said that the report was unacceptable?