

Government Orders

the various groups which proudly make up the fabric of Canada that no such obstacles emerged.

• (1330)

We are faced with a situation in which we can look forward to an accommodation. In a country which is pluralistic, bilingual and multicultural, a measure like this, the result that it has achieved and the support that it has received so far is a good sign of the accommodations that Canadians are prepared to make to reinforce and strengthen the national fabric.

Many people, as do I, visualize lots of possible and potential tensions among the various groups within Canada. Multiculturalism and pluralism is a new kind of national experience. Canada is not a country that has the benefit of a monolithic, racial, religious, cultural group which views the nation as an expression of its identity. Most countries are like that. By contrast, our country is a country whose most basic identity comes from the accommodation of minority groups, from the tolerance of differences and from respect for differences, something which is even better than mere tolerance.

We are making our country work when we accommodate legislation like this. We are helping to set an example for others in the country. I want to express the pleasure that I feel at seeing this important step, demonstrating again the openness of this great country of ours.

Mr. Svend J. Robinson (Burnaby—Kingsway): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that the House was able to agree unanimously to extend the hours to deal with this important legislation. I want to pay tribute to all members of the House who co-operated in this regard, particularly the member for York Centre who was instrumental in achieving this.

This legislation is legislation for which on behalf of the New Democratic Party I have called for some time. I welcome the government's decision to move forward on it at this moment.

I recall, as I am sure my colleague from York Centre will recall, and indeed I believe my colleague from Niagara Falls was in the House and the committee at that time as well, that during debates on the Divorce Act

in 1985 and 1986 there were discussions on this subject. At that point I made it clear that certainly in principle we supported this amendment.

On January 23, 1986, the then Minister of Justice, the member for St. John's West, said this: "I have instructed my officials to establish an expeditious process of consultation with representatives of all the various interests in order to resolve these outstanding issues".

Four years later that expeditious process has resulted in this legislation. I think it is not a minute too soon. I am going to give a couple of examples of the practical effect of the absence of this legislation on women in this country who have suffered as a result.

I want to pay tribute to the many groups and individuals across Canada who have played such an important role in this historic legislation. Those groups include B'nai Brith, the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Coalition of Jewish Women for the Get, and a broad range of others.

I want to single out in particular the contribution of a lawyer, John Syrtash, who has done an extraordinary job on behalf of the coalition that has been seeking changes in this law and, in many ways, who was instrumental as well in achieving changes to provincial legislation in the province of Ontario in 1986.

Following the decision of the Minister of Justice to look into this matter, B'nai Brith Canada conducted a comprehensive study on the use of the Get as a bargaining tool in Jewish divorce proceedings. That study pointed out, and it has already been noted, that Jews who are loyal to the teachings and practices of their faith are not free to enter into a second marriage unless the prior marriage has been terminated either by the death of the spouse or by the execution of the divorce procedure recognized by Halacha, which is Jewish law.

This study documented that in some 311 cases the refusal to issue a Get resulted in very substantial pain and difficulty to one of the spouses. The vast majority of those spouses affected—in some 202 of the cases—are in fact women who were affected by their husband's refusal to grant the Get. There were certainly as well some instances of women who refused to consent to the Get. The reality is that it is primarily Jewish women who have been hurt by this requirement.