

Oral Questions

Is the decision to have children the responsibility of the government and women themselves? That is where the Leader of the Opposition made a blunder, and he made it clear where he is coming from when he talks about these problems.

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[English]

SOMALIA INQUIRY

Mr. Jack Frazer (Saanich—Gulf Islands, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, both the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Defence have said that they want to get to the bottom of the events in Somalia. They have pledged to act after the commission of inquiry submits its report.

However, section 69 of the National Defence Act requires that a trial for most services offences must begin within three years of the alleged offence. Because the commission is not scheduled to report until June 1996, it seems that discipline and leadership failings of late 1992 and early 1993 will go untried.

Was the minister aware of this limitation when he called the inquiry? How exactly does he plan to get to the bottom of events if charges cannot even be laid?

• (1435)

Hon. David M. Collenette (Minister of National Defence and Minister of Veterans Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government is fully aware of the provisions of the National Defence Act with respect to the statute of limitations on non-indictable offences. I am sure the commission on Somalia is also well aware of it.

With respect to the question on charges, we do not presume that further charges are to be laid, but we do not preclude it either. I would ask the hon. member and his party to let the commission do its job and we will do our job in government. Then we will have justice served.

Mr. Jack Frazer (Saanich—Gulf Islands, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, this Liberal government took a year to announce a public inquiry. It was almost another full year before the inquiry began to hear witnesses.

Last November I asked the minister to suspend the courts martial and proceed immediately with the inquiry. He refused. How can this minister explain to the Canadian public that because of his delays justice will be denied by a technicality?

Hon. David M. Collenette (Minister of National Defence and Minister of Veterans Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, unlike the Reform Party, we have a profound respect for the justice system in this country.

The hon. member is fully aware that we were precluded from calling the inquiry because there were courts martial in progress and then subsequently there were appeals. Until we had the Westray mine decision of the supreme court in May of this year, we could not have started a commission without risking having the charges quashed of people currently on trial.

If I had done what the hon. member advocated we do and people who have subsequently been charged and convicted were then not subject to the justice system, he would be the first one yelling and screaming in the House of Commons that somehow the government was responsible for the denial of justice.

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[Translation]

ELECTIONS CANADA

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, a common thread runs through the Prime Minister's entire political career. Every time Quebec wanted to assert itself, he has stood in its way. We just learned that Elections Canada has initiated the whole process required for holding a Canada-wide referendum. This is probably not a spontaneous initiative by Elections Canada.

Are we to understand that the Prime Minister is refusing to recognize Quebecers' verdict in the referendum and getting ready to hold a Canada-wide referendum in order to overturn the democratic decision of Quebecers?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I did not speak to the Chief Electoral Officer. If he has decided to set the whole machinery in motion, an election will certainly be held within two or three years. For the moment, my only goal is the one we all share: winning the referendum in two weeks.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, since the Prime Minister can see that it is less and less likely that he will win the referendum in Quebec, I ask him again: Does he realize that by staying extremely vague on the Elections Canada manoeuvres, he is raising doubts as to his democratic intentions?

I ask him again: Does the Prime Minister reject the idea of holding a referendum in order to counter the democratic decision Quebecers will make in two weeks?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer reports directly to the House of Commons. All the hon. member has to do is call and ask him why he is getting ready to hold an election. An election can be called any day. I could get up tomorrow morning and call an election.

That is a prime minister's privilege.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Chrétien (Saint-Maurice): You should at least be here for another two weeks because you would not be coming back.

Call the Chief Electoral Officer and ask him. As far as I am concerned, the referendum is what we are working on at this time. We did not need to get rid of the leader of the no side. Mr. Johnson is doing an excellent job. We did not have to change our strategy because we are clearly telling citizens that all statements by the Leader of the Opposition or the so-called structures he might develop by negotiating with God knows whom— We are simply telling Quebecers that these people are