in the country. This could be accomplished much easier by having a poll done by some company.

Mr. Howard McCurdy (Windsor—St. Clair): Mr. Speaker, I suppose that there must be a large number of people watching this debate on television and wondering what on God's earth we are talking about here.

• (1750)

I heard one member just moments ago talk about the doubt and the loss of confidence in the parliamentary process. Then we had to sit through an exercise which demonstrated that a great deal of incompetence and a great deal of idiocy occur here and is portrayed on television sets across this land with parliamentarians who purport to be participating in a particular debate but utterly fail to do so, insulting one another on bases that have nothing at all to do with constructive contribution to debate.

It strikes me that we could not have had ludicrousness portrayed more starkly than to enter into debate on whether we call one another by our names or our constituencies. The real issue is whether in fact, as the hon. House leader on the other side indicated, a referendum is a noble exercise in the democratic process.

I would submit there are some instances in which a referendum can be a very appropriate means by which the electorate, the common person, can be involved in a decision-making process. As I have said in this House before, if the electorate is to engage in making decisions then the decisions better be clearly set out in terms of what the decision is all about.

What we have before us is the prospect of some fraction of 25 million people, those old enough to vote, making a decision not on whether we should have alcohol, not on whether we should have conscription or any other similarly simple question, but on the very complex package which the record will indicate not even the day-by-day participants understand very well. If they understand very well the variety of propositions which will be the constitutional package, they certainly have serious doubts about what the implications of all of those propositions might be.

If this referendum is to go forward it is going to be exceedingly important that every person who constitutes the electorate understands clearly what the proposition is, that is they understand what the constitutional proposals will be in a whole number of spheres and who is to be trusted to communicate what those issues are.

The House leader on the other side suggested that the most noble form of the democratic process, the most noble expression of freedom of speech and freedom of association, is to have every little group represented that can get up the money and is able to constitute themselves a committee for the purpose of taking one side or another in this referendum. What he suggested was that no spending limit is the most ideal expression of democratic freedom if we mean by that freedom of association and freedom of speech for the wealthy.

Have no doubt about it. This referendum, whether it is decided in terms of what is right to decide as I see it or wrong to decide as I see it, has a very large probability of being decided in direct proportion to the amount of money available to one side or the other.

An hon. member: Democracy by the highest bid.

Mr. McCurdy: Yes, it will be democracy by the weight of gold that can be delivered to one side of the issue or the other.

If you think we are talking from a vacuum of experience, witness the vast majority of referenda that have occurred in the United States where there are no such spending limits and you will learn the lesson. If that is not a sufficient demonstration of the dangers, many of us had those dangers adequately demonstrated to us in the 1988 election where gold by weight determined the outcome.

We are not talking about a defence of democracy by those spokespersons on the other side, we are talking about a defence of manipulation. We are talking about a defence of the capacity of those who have to lead those who have not down the garden path. Do not mistake the prospect. The electorate of this country will never understand clearly what they are voting for and what they are voting against if there is an election based on the premises being defended by this government.