

members of the House and that they should put their questions and comments through the Chair.

Mr. Sauvageau: I apologize, Mr. Speaker.

My first question to the hon. member is this: Is it a plebiscite or a referendum that was held in Prince Edward Island?

Is the hon. member's disappointment that great because we support this proposal? Would he like it better if we opposed it? He talks about petty politics and so on, and he seems deeply disappointed. I get the impression he feels that way because we support this proposal. I am right?

[English]

Mr. O'Brien: Mr. Speaker, I would be happy to answer the member's questions.

• (1325)

First of all, if I might correct his comment, what I said was that as the minister did, I intended to speak to the motion and that I would find that to be an interesting process. I thought this House was all about the process of actually rising in our places and speaking to what was on the floor, without getting into some diatribe about some future referendum in Quebec which has very little, if anything, to do with what we are supposed to be speaking to here today. My earlier comments were that I would try to speak to the motion.

As to the member's questions, I agree with him. I have heard the term plebiscite used in reference to the vote in Prince Edward Island and I have heard the term referendum. I am sure he knows some people believe that to be an argument of semantics, that the terms are interchangeable. There are others who would say no, there is a very real difference between a plebiscite and a referendum.

My colleagues and friends from Prince Edward Island most often referred to the vote that was taken as a plebiscite. It was 60 to 40 in favour of this project in 1988. Frankly I think it is a political science or semantics argument.

As to my disappointment that the member asked me about, no, I was very pleased to hear the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition rise in his place today saying he would support the project. However, I heard Bloc members lecturing the minister about anticipated objections from the Bloc. I was in the House and heard the minister's statement. Not once did he make reference to members of any particular political party and what their views might be. He simply invited support from all members of the House and he hoped that he would not hear particular objections raised.

We are a little tired on this side of these gratuitous lectures and irrelevant comments and that is the source of my disappointment. However, I am very pleased the Bloc has seen fit to

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support the motion. It would just be nice if those members would speak to it.

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Lavigne (Verdun—Saint-Paul): Mr. Speaker, one of the extremely positive aspects of the bridge over the Northumberland Strait is that it is one of the first and most important capital projects on which the federal government and the private sector will co-operate closely.

Ten years ago, examples of this kind of co-operation in public works were extremely rare.

For the public and in practice, the distinction between public sector and private sector projects was very clear. One presumed that public works like roads, sewers, energy production were carried out by governments and financed with tax revenues. This perception has changed entirely over the last few years.

In all the industrialized world and at all levels of government, we see private companies and consortiums take on infrastructure work that was previously the preserve of the public sector.

Conditions can change, but the basic principle is that the private sector makes the necessary financing arrangements and assumes most of the risks in exchange for the right to acquire or rent the facility and charge user fees.

It is quite clear that Canadians are also changing their opinion on how we can modernize our infrastructure. According to a recent study by the Canadian Construction Association, for example, close to 58 per cent of Canadians agree that we should ask users of freeways to pay for the construction of a network which is financed by the private sector, instead of imposing a tax on gas or special levies.

• (1330)

One of the main reasons for this changing attitude is the alarming debt burden all levels of government are faced with as well as the disgust more and more Canadians feel towards their government, which keeps increasing taxes to finance costly megaprojects. Yet we must renovate our infrastructure, especially in the transportation, communication and energy areas, if we want to remain competitive on the world market.

That is why the principle behind letting the private sector finance and build much needed public facilities is becoming more and more interesting.

Although Canadians generally support this principle, they do have some legitimate concerns about joint participation of the public and private sectors in infrastructure projects. The public wants to be sure it will not be asked to bail out ill-conceived and underfinanced projects. It wants to be sure that private contractors will meet environmental standards. It wants to make sure that the cost will not become prohibitive, once these facilities are put in the hands of the private sector. It wants to make sure that the decisions concerning co-operative projects are made