

*Government Orders*

It is true the bill as we have it today is not a perfect one. Our caucus however was pleased when the government accepted many amendments we introduced. I still have some concerns. The government has not made a commitment to not pass the constitutional reform package without the clear majority from each of the four regions of Canada: the Atlantic, Ontario, the west and Quebec.

The government must commit itself to respect not only a national majority but a clear majority from each of the four regions of our nation. The government should not use this bill as a tool to simply manipulate the provinces into agreement. The referendum should be an essential component of the decision-making on the future of Canada.

Let the people of our great democratic country express themselves and determine their future directly on a vital issue such as the issue facing the country today.

In the spirit of our federal country and our proud tradition of protecting minorities while respecting majorities, we should ensure real agreement across the country by demanding that the referendum vote pass in each region of the nation.

If we ask Quebecers with other Canadians if they want to journey further with us but provide no guarantee that we will not swallow their answers in the majority of the rest of the country, what kind of signal are we giving them?

Quebec, like the west and the other unique regions of Canada, must know that its distinctive perspective and separate importance to the country is cherished by the promise that its will will carry weight.

Each region must be able to affirm Canada and we must affirm the importance of that in any referendum we propose. Also, it is important that its mechanism be fair, and that the people of each region of Canada who must choose whether or not to vote and how to do so know that their opinions will be treated with all due respect.

Indeed, the referendum has to be fair not only to each of the regions but also with respect to each side of the question. Once again, the government refuses to provide a framework for fairness. Do we want money to decide the question of our country's future, or will we provide the essential structure of contribution limits to allow the real will of the people to be expressed?

As in any election in Canada, fairness must be ensured by keeping the battle ground level. Spending limits and, more important, contribution limits guard the right of Canadians to make their own decisions and express them unhindered by the absence of wealth or unduly purchased by it.

There should not be an illusion of support due to wealth alone.

I am glad that the government has listened to some opposition concerns, the concerns of the Liberal caucus at amendment time, accepting a number of our amendments.

Last, the government's bill does not ensure fairness in another dimension of administration of a referendum, the development of the question to be asked. The government proposes a few days of parliamentary debate on the wording of the question which would only allow for amendment, not participation, in the wording by opposition parties.

In an issue as important as the future of our country should not we, as members of Parliament, abandon our disagreements and allow the people of Canada instead to benefit from our differences by consulting together to present them with the most clear and helpful question possible?

The Prime Minister has assured reporters that his lack of popularity would not interfere with the determining of the future of this country through a referendum. He is willing to trust the people of Canada to put aside partisan political considerations to express truly their will for Canada. The people are to transcend partisanship in this essential issue but the elected members of this government, unwilling to let their control of events slip in the slightest, even for the sake of Canada, are not.

This is not consistent nor does it give Canada and Canadians their best chance before a referendum.

The moral force of popular will is the essence of a referendum. Whether it is legally or not legally binding is merely a debate on legal technicality. Moral force goes beyond the confines of technicalities. Moral force is at a higher level, on a higher pedestal. Moral force expresses, in the context of the national unity debate before the country, the will of the people, the will of all Canadians from sea to sea. In turn moral power or strength depends on the fairness of the process, how the referendum is conducted and its results interpreted and accepted.