

*Government Orders*

The Meech Lake process really left out the people of Canada. It was on that fundamental ground that it failed. In its failure, it has come close to driving this country apart. One of the results of the failure is a divide in fundamental perception about the understanding of what this country is. Many people in Quebec who until then felt themselves to be welcome and part of Canada saw the failure of Meech Lake as a rejection of franco-phone Quebec. In the rest of Canada, Meech Lake was seen as a failure of constitutional process, a failure of consultation and in no way was seen as a rejection of Quebec. In that divided perception are the seeds of the division that we are now in this country working to repair.

All members of this House, perhaps with a few minor exceptions, want the current process to work. I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in Canada want the current process to work. If it is to work we have to establish the possibility of genuine consultation with the people of Canada, and this bill seeks to provide it.

As I said, our party has called for an opening up of the constitutional process. We thoroughly supported the idea that the two parliamentary committees, the first known as the Edwards-Beaudoin committee looking at an amending formula, have a wide process of consultation with the Canadian people, and that took place. We supported the establishment of the Beaudoin-Dobbie commission. We were gravely disappointed at the difficulties it had at the beginning in establishing an effective consultative process with Canada and we have pressed from the beginning for a constituent assembly.

We were pleased to see the government ultimately accept the wisdom of that approach and agree to these five conferences across Canada which have contributed enormously to the improvement of the atmosphere, improvement of the process, and are offering us now some genuine hope we can settle the constitutional issue at least for the time being and get on with the other issues of the day.

The referendum bill we have before us authorizes the government, if it deems it appropriate in the public interest, to call for a referendum. It then provides a process for approaching Parliament for approval of a question to be put to the people of Canada and establishes the procedures under which the referendum is to be held.

We have some concerns with the details of the bill. We have been assured in part by the statements made by the government in the last 24 hours that it is ready to consider sympathetically amendments which we hope will allay the concerns we have. On that basis I have no difficulty in voting to support this bill because I believe it is important the people of Canada be given the possibility of being consulted on constitutional amendments.

In the remaining moments I have I want to address a couple of specific concerns which I think the Canadian people should be aware of as we proceed down the path of national referenda.

I think we should ensure that referenda only be used in constitutional issues. We do not want to move to a system of governance that they have, for example, in the state of California where referenda can be forced by special interest groups on virtually any question and it ultimately ends up where, in the nature of our society, the rich can control the results. In a referenda on an issue which affects the powerful in any country the powerful will have an undue influence in the result.

That happens within our parliamentary system as well and we should not be naive about that, but there are risks in allowing in our mass media age every issue to be handled by the process of referenda. On the other hand we should be clear that it is appropriate in the case of a constitutional amendment for us to consult the Canadian people.

This bill does not of course provide that any constitutional amendment must automatically go to a national referendum, but rather it is: "In the public interest to obtain by means of a referendum the opinion of the electors on any question relating to the Constitution of Canada". The cabinet or the government can set the process in motion.

The two committees of this House that looked at the proposition of a referendum suggested it should be narrowed to situations where it was helpful to determine whether there was a national consensus. I suspect, certainly in the current round of negotiations, when this bill is passed that the government cannot escape the conclusion that the offer that is to be put together to use that language, the constitutional package that comes out of these rounds of discussion, will have to be in some fashion or other put to the people of Canada for their views.