

Private Members' Business

out the people being consulted. The same applies in Switzerland where there is a binding referendum at all levels of government and people are consulted regularly.

Switzerland, like Canada, has many languages and cultures and the referendum process has united that country. I would like to point out that Switzerland is a united country and has four languages. Therefore, the argument that we could not have a referendum process because of our two official languages and many cultures is inappropriate as well.

In conclusion, to make our country a better place in which to live we need a referendum process which can be initiated by the people, by Parliament, by the executive branch of the Crown, and which would be binding on the government of the day.

I hope at the end of the debate, but before the hour expires, members will show trust in the Canadian people and allow a vote on this motion to take place.

Mr. Rob Nicholson (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in this debate.

This motion proposes a constitutional amendment that would allow for referenda to be initiated on any matter coming within the jurisdiction of the federal Parliament. Once a yes or no decision has been made in a referendum, the Government of Canada would then be forced to implement it. I have a number of problems with that and with the whole notion of referenda in general.

First, the reason I oppose this motion is that it implies that there is something fundamentally wrong with our system of government, that the parliamentary system we have does not work, and that this Chamber does not reflect the hopes and aspirations of Canadians. I have opposed suggestions like this throughout my life.

As the Chamber knows, in the early seventies, a previous Prime Minister indicated his belief that the present system was not good enough for Canada. It spawned a whole cottage industry of suggested changes to the British North America Act.

One of the questions I raised in an academic setting, and which I would like to raise it here as well, is that surely the onus rests on those who indicate that there is something fundamentally wrong with our parliamentary system. The onus is on them to demonstrate why there is

something wrong and what it is that they are proposing that is so much better.

The hon. member who just spoke talked about the systems in the United States and in Switzerland. I have heard it all before. People point to the European republics and to the experience south of the border. I always ask them the same thing: What is there about the Government of Italy, France, Switzerland or the United States that you believe works so well that our system has to be the one that is radically altered?

I have maintained that, yes, there are mistakes. This Chamber has made mistakes. But over the existence of the House of Commons these past almost 125 years, our record compares favourably with every other democratic government, or any government in the world for that matter. I suggest to them that the onus should be with them to show why this parliamentary system of ours does not work.

As well, I oppose this motion for what it says about the role of a member of Parliament. The hon. member just said that everybody talked about just the free trade agreement. I am not going to get into the strategy of the Liberal Party.

I said many times during the election: "I am prepared to talk about all issues. I am willing to say where I stand on all of them." If the Liberal Party said that the only thing it wanted to talk about was free trade, that is a decision that it made and that it will have to live with for the next two to three years. I believe there is a greater obligation for members of Parliament to say exactly where he or she stands on some very difficult issues.

In the 1984 election, the subject of abortion was not an issue, but I believed—and I think I share this with other members of Parliament—that on the most difficult moral question of the 20th century a member of Parliament or anyone who stands for public office has an obligation to say exactly where he or she stands.

When it comes to things like that, I do not think it is a question of the changes of public opinion. I had many people say to me: "I am sure you have taken polls in your riding. I am sure you have seen a Gallup poll. The majority of Canadians do not agree with you." I do not want to be in this position. I do not think members of Parliament should be in a position where they say: "I