

Government Orders

I greatly appreciate the co-operation of members of the Official Opposition and the representative of the New Democratic Party on the legislative committee who worked so hard to see that the bill was improved at committee stage.

The question which will be put, as I suggested earlier, will be discussed fully with the leaders of the recognized opposition parties and will, of course, be debated in three days of debate in this House and three days of debate in the Senate. It is contemplated that the question which will be put will thus be the will, not only of the officially recognized parties, but also of this Parliament. That is a lot of time for debate.

It is, of course, a question which will have gone through the crucible with the provinces, the territories and other constituent groups. The hon. Leader of the New Democratic Party referred earlier to the aboriginal peoples. There is input being received on an almost daily basis on this issue and, ultimately, the question. What will precede the framing of the question will be a resolution of the House of Commons and the Senate which will again be brought to both Houses for debate after the response to the Beaudoin-Dobbie report as tabled by the government. This is after the successful conclusion, one would hope, of the discussions or the conferences with the provinces, the territories and the aboriginal leadership. I believe this is due to resume in a matter of days.

• (1250)

The response to what has been going on in this House and in committee over the last few days, I think, has been quite positive. The reaction and the interest of the Canadian people has been engaged. We have received a good deal of feedback in our own offices about the referendum legislation. There are many who were asking us to please get on with it, please have it there and please have it available as an option if it is required.

They are puzzled by the voices of those who seem to oppose the idea of a referendum and they are profoundly puzzled by those who suggest that this referendum is an anti-democratic procedure. They are completely flabbergasted that—

Mr. Plamondon: This bill.

Mr. Edwards: —that suggestion would be made.

My friend says: "This bill". This bill could not be more democratic. It is framed with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in mind. It is framed to give maximum opportunity to Canadians to express their points of view.

Mr. Lapierre: The power of money.

Mr. Edwards: My friend says it is open to the use of money.

We had an interesting discussion with the Leader of the New Democratic Party earlier in the House on the question of money. I challenged her because she was quoting studies in the United States that said that candidates for Congress had been more successful when large amounts of money were spent on their campaigns. That may well be the case.

However, to transliterate that right back to the Canadian experience is very difficult to do and I challenged her to—

Mr. Lapierre: Free trade.

Mr. Edwards: The free trade debate. I challenged her on that very subject and asked if there were any studies that she could point to that would demonstrate that there was a linkage between anybody's expenditure in the free trade debate, on one side or the other, and the results of the 1988 election. She was not able to provide me with any through either the comic book of the CLC or any other campaign that was mounted.

The reaction has been generally positive. I quote from today's edition of *The Gazette* in Montreal: "The Mulroney government need not apologize for using its majority to pass a bill authorizing a national referendum on constitutional change. It is a crude move, but it has to be done and it has to be done quickly. Ottawa has the right to give itself the legislative tools it may need to try to break the constitutional deadlock. It has the duty to acquire the tools by urgent means because the country faces urgent deadlines".

That is a statement of reality and I think that Canadians from Quebec and from other parts of the country are very much awake to the urgent reality that is facing us.

The Gazette goes on to say: "The bill is just an enabling bill or legislation to enable the federal government to hold a national referendum on a question of its choosing and to set certain conditions for the vote".