

Oral Questions

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, we read in the papers and we hear on radio and television that the government is planning to have a referendum only in the provinces where the premiers do not want to agree with the government.

I want to ask the minister if it is true. I would like to say to this minister that we proposed a referendum, not as a club to try to put some discipline on some premiers, but to give a voice to the Canadian people and give the Constitution to all the citizens of Canada. We want every Canadian to be consulted. We do not want the government to use it as a political tool, but as an instrument of unity in this country.

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, we could not agree more. The referendum should not be used as a political tool or for showboating or for dividing Canadians. The only basis on which a referendum should be held is if it will unite Canadians.

Our goal is to see an agreement between the federal government and the provinces for constitutional renewal. All of us on all sides of the House should be working for that.

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, this is exactly what we are asking for. I am happy that the minister said the Conservatives do not want to use the referendum as a tool against the premiers of Alberta, Newfoundland or Manitoba, but to give a voice to the Canadian people.

I would like to know from the minister if this government will take that stance and make sure that the Constitution really belongs to the people of Canada and not to the backroom boys who are back in the back rooms against the will of the people at this time?

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, I may have missed something here but I fully remember the last time that constitutional change was made. The hon. member at that time was back in the kitchen doing deals. There will be none of that under this government.

Mr. Chrétien: And you voted for it.

Mr. Beatty: The hon. member is terribly proud to say that after he cooked up the deal in the kitchen we voted for it. What we want is an arrangement where all the premiers work together with the federal government, where there is an agreement between the provinces and the federal government which will unite Canadians.

We do not need showboating, we do not need divisive comments and we do not need partisanship.

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BALTIC STATES

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Acting Prime Minister or the Acting Secretary of State for External Affairs or somebody.

Last weekend, 90 per cent of the people of Lithuania voted for the unconditional withdrawal of the over 200,000 Russian troops that are presently occupying the Baltic states. As the external affairs committee reported this morning, there are enormous difficulties in sending these troops back in terms of shortages of housing, training and employment.

I want to ask whichever minister is responsible these days: Will this matter be raised with President Boris Yeltsin in the visit tomorrow? Will we gain a commitment for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Baltic states? Will the government be offering, as recommended by the external affairs committee, direct assistance for housing and for employment so that the Russian troops can return to their homeland?

Hon. Harvie Andre (Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, regrettably the Secretary of State for External Affairs has become ill and is unable to be here at the moment. I would certainly take the hon. member's representation as that and communicate it.

I am sure, as he well understands, there will be a long agenda of items under discussion. This will undoubtedly be a part of it, but I will ensure that his representation is made on the broader question of aid to Russia and the kind of commercial relations we might have.

Obviously we are interested in the issues the hon. member raised. I am sure they will be part of the discussions the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for External Affairs have.

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the minister who will be speaking on behalf of the government if, in that meeting with the President of Russia, the question of a demilitarized zone in the Arctic will be raised, if we will gain agreement from the President to go ahead immediately with the establishment of an Arctic council, and if we will establish joint programs to clean up Arctic waters, especially those that have been polluted by nuclear waste.