

Standing Orders

Parliament recognizes the role of the Official Opposition and other opposition Parties in the development of the business of the House of Commons. The tradition in Canada has always been that whenever the rules and regulations of the House of Commons are changed, it is only after considerable negotiation and discussion among all of the players. The government Party and the opposition Parties get together and spend weeks or months until they come to an agreement on changes which benefit this House. Those changes are then introduced as changes to the Standing Orders.

Today such is not the case. Today we see a Government which has decided what is best in the way of rules and regulations for the House of Commons and then acted unilaterally. It has done an end run around the negotiating process and imposed a set of regulations on the House of Commons.

I want to say how shocked I was, after spending many, many weeks with my colleagues on both sides of the House trying to negotiate and come to an understanding, to find when I opened up the Order Paper for Monday that the Government decided to introduce what it thought were appropriate changes to the Standing Orders. No agreement, no understanding, no consensus, no coming together. I very much regret that the Government decided to move in that fashion. I am pleased to say there is still some hope that a negotiated settlement can be achieved, but I think this motion illustrates how the Government really sees Parliament.

That ought not to come as a shock or surprise to the people of Canada. That is the very same political Party, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, that stormed the Speaker's chair. I remember sitting in my seat when Members of that Party went up to the Chair and screamed at the top of their lungs at the Speaker in order to disrupt Parliament. They did not like a particular piece of legislation. However, that did not work so they decided to abandon the House of Commons and close it down for around 16 days. No business was conducted because the Progressive Conservatives decided that they knew best. They decided they could overrule the House of Commons. They could overrule the traditions and practices and rules and regulations of Parliament. I think it shocked Canadians to their souls to learn that the Progressive Conservatives, who often gave the impression of being staunch supporters of democratic traditions, were prepared to storm the Speaker's chair and close down Parliament for days.

I want to read some very important and appropriate words to the House of Commons:

We on this side of the House in more than one party believe that a fundamental issue is at stake—perhaps the fundamental issue.

I refer to the right of parliament to control itself and thereby to control the government. This question has arisen before and we know it is an issue over which passions can be aroused on both sides of the house. It is also, in the context of this country at this time, an issue which can become obscured and partisan and, indeed, the subject of passionate debate.

All hon. members know that legislatures do not today everywhere enjoy the high repute in which we would like to see legislatures held. There is now a popular impression in some quarters that legislatures are an obstacle to good

government. That impression offers to those who genuinely seek reform the natural temptation to change more than is needed and a temptation to change the purpose of parliament in the name of improving its procedures.

This impatience with legislature, therefore, requires special vigilance on the part of defenders and friends of parliament. I assume that all of us, being here, would support and defend the purposes of parliament.

It is not a simple task, in an age impressed by urgency and efficiency, to defend an institution whose purpose is to deter legislation that is bad, sometimes to delay, and sometimes indeed to oppose to the end bad legislation. It is not easy to make Canadians, who are accustomed to their freedoms, aware when these freedoms are under threat. I would hope that no one on either side of the house would use the weaknesses of legislatures in the public esteem to weaken parliament further.

The great majority of the members of this house know that if parliament becomes a rubber stamp it becomes useless.

That is the main reason for being here, and one weapon we possess is our ability on occasion to compel the government to reassess its measures and force it to change or even to halt a course of action which we believe to be inadequate or wrong. If that were not necessary parliament would not be necessary. But governments make mistakes, even governments with computers. A government which knows it must face an effective opposition will take more care than will a government which has the power under its rules to disarm the opposition.

Members of a government are subject to fault like the rest of us. The function of the opposition is by our probing to reveal and correct those faults, by our presence and by our powers to make the government more careful, to make the government more compassionate, to make the government more responsive to the needs of the people of this country.

There are some facts to establish about parliament and about parliamentary reform. The first is that the problems that frustrate Canada were not created here in parliament, and they will not be solved by a mere amendment of the rules of parliament. It was not the rules of parliament that caused inflation, created a crisis in housing, or slowed the sales of grain. It is not the reform of parliament which will produce a satisfactory foreign policy, bring growth to our economy, reduce unemployment, end the alienation of the young or reduce the strains within Confederation. Parliament is not the cause of these frustrations, and parliament ought not to be the victim or the scapegoat of them.

—there is no magic in procedure, no magic that will cause the government to draft more and better laws quickly, above all, no magic that will produce policies and solutions where there have been none produced to date.

If this government had no opposition at all to face it would still be behind. It would still face a backlog of things it should be doing and problems it has not been able to solve. That, after all, is the fate of governments in a changing and complex time, in a changing and complex country. We are not going to transform the capacity of this government simply by amending the rules of parliament. There is no magic wand, and there should be no attempt to suggest that these or any other changes to the rules will suddenly and as if by magic make the government efficient.

The third fact is that the purpose of parliamentary reform is not simply to serve efficiency, as the hon. member who introduced the motion seemed to believe, important though efficiency naturally is. The purpose, rather, is to work out a process of debate and legislation which is consistent with the democratic values of the Canadian people.

We do not simply need a procedure which passes laws. We need a procedure which also passes the demanding test of free and adequate debate. It is not enough to be concerned merely with the efficiency of the process. I would assume that the legislative process in the Soviet Union is very efficient. But we are a different kind of country and the rules of our parliamentary debate must reflect and protect that difference. We must not demean the importance of debate.

there must also be time for adequate discussion here. The right of discussion and debate, the associated right of inquiry and the consequent capacity to arouse and inform public opinion, is the single most important safeguard the country has against arbitrary, secret or unresponsive government. This is the place in Canada where grievances can be raised with most effect. To