

Senate Reform

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Hamelin (Charlevoix): Mr. Speaker, this motion introduced by the Hon. Member for Calgary-North (Mr. Gagnon) has obviously some merit but it should lead to a quick solution. The Senate reform issue has been under discussion for a long time and our First Ministers agreed to discuss it thoroughly at the next meeting on the Constitution.

Looking at the issue of the Senate in 1988, one has to ask a number of questions. In the distant past, we were commoners, just lowly people elected to the Commons and there was another Chamber, the very select Senate, whose members were a little more educated and in a position to correct mistakes made by humble commoners. Things have changed quite a bit since then. In the old days, regional concerns were the main factor defined in Canada. Senators had to protect the interests of the provinces, of minorities and they were supposed to voice regional concerns. The big question that should be asked of Canadians, the only truly significant one, a question that would be really difficult for anybody to answer is this one: Can most Canadians tell me the name of their Senator, Mr. Speaker? Not too many people would be able to tell us the designation of a senator who has just been summoned.

Mrs. Bourgault: I couldn't.

Mr. Hamelin: And I would be very much surprised to find someone who knows the name of his or her Senator. Some of the senators do not even know the name of their "diocese", and that is a fact.

Then of course the Parliament of Canada now has a greater number of Members. We have all kinds of information media, we have lobbies, we have new laws which make it possible for women's groups and minorities to have their say, so these days you simply cannot hoodwink Canadians right and left! First thing you know they tell their Members in the House what they should do.

So my colleague was saying: What a wonderful idea, a Senate! A potential reservoir of Ministers, a place to find election candidates, indeed a place where there would not be any real national Party with Members elected in all provinces.

Mr. Speaker, I would point out that the situation would be corrected if we had an electoral system based on proportional representation where we would be sure to have elected representatives from all regions. I would suggest that it is a very weak argument to claim that the Senate ought to be a retirement home in recognition of services rendered, because that is exactly what the Senate has become, a retirement home for people who have served faithfully.

Not so long ago every legislative assembly—including Quebec's—had its very own small Senate, its very own small upper chamber.

Mr. Speaker, nobody shed tears of blood or cried in desperation when we got rid of this perfectly useless Upper Chamber which was supposed to represent the aspirations of

Quebec's various regions. Nobody cried when we did away with this non-elected Senate.

But let us admit that we preserve this institution and go along with the arguments of the Western and Eastern provinces which are in favour of the so-called "Triple E" Senate. I foresee already that the Premiers will have problems at the next Constitutional Conference. An elected Senate means a Senate with powers. But, for Heaven sake, which one? What will be the real problems of this elected Senate? Do you not feel already the confrontation which will oppose the two Houses? Will we have to deal with suspensive vetos, effective vetos in such and such areas, and this and that?

Let us talk now of a Senate with equal representation, say ten Senators representing Prince Edward Island and ten Senators representing Ontario. This creates problems.

Let us talk now about an efficient Senate. This stretches the imagination, Mr. Speaker! An efficient Senate! If the past foretells the future, we are faced with disaster. The notion of an efficient Senate truly boggles the mind!

I suggest, therefore, that this proposal which comes within the framework of the system has merit. But I suggest also that we should have a substantial debate, the only one we should have now to prepare the forthcoming Constitutional Conference and, as the Quebec wing said during the weekend, we should ponder at least once the need to maintain this "pensioners' House for services rendered".

[English]

Mr. Gordon Taylor (Bow River): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the Hon. Member for Calgary North (Mr. Gagnon) for bringing in this motion. A Triple E Senate is strongly supported by the people in my riding. My motion on a Triple E Senate was shredded of the equality from each province and the election from each province and then sent to the First Ministers for consideration. This motion reopens the matter.

I support this motion for a number of reasons; first, the House of Commons does not answer the regional requirements. The House of Commons is based on population. As long as we can foresee there will be a greater number of Members from Ontario and Quebec than from the rest of the provinces, there is no equal consideration of regional matters. If we are going to have a Senate at all, there should be an equal number of Members from each province and territory so they can consider matters on a regional basis equally.

● (1750)

Second, there is no accountability in the present Senate. The Senators hold up Bills that we returned to Parliament to pass. These are Bills that the people want with respect to immigration. The Senators are accountable to no one. They simply do what they like. They ignore the public. This is a democracy. We are supposed to be doing what the people want. The Senate is not doing that.