

*Petitions to Parliament*

Measures Act, before and after, and there have been other occasions. They do not happen all that often. We have another one at the moment with regard to the statutory grain rates. No doubt there will be others with regard to the Cruise missile and other issues, such as capital punishment, gun control—you name it. On those occasions, even if there was a surplus of petitions, hundreds and thousands of pages, tens and hundreds of thousands of names, I have never seen or heard the accusation that citizens of our country or of Great Britain are abusing their right to petition. When they do it in massive volume, it is because of an issue of such extreme urgency and importance that thousands of individuals will collect the signatures of hundreds of thousands of others to petition Parliament. There is no room for the Chair, the Table Officers, the Government of the day or the House of Commons to interfere with the presentation of petitions under Routine Proceedings, however voluminous or numerous. We owe it to those who exercise their right to petition, even if it is only one citizen, that their petitions go to Parliament and are considered worthy of a response. They are worthy of a response even if it is only in the form of a letter to the petitioner from the appropriate Cabinet Minister, from the Government, or from the House of Commons. More particularly, it should be a response from a committee of the House of Commons. If nothing else, surely that is a matter of common courtesy.

● (1720)

Citizens do not lightly petition Parliament. We are all aware of how difficult it is to have citizens take a more continued interest in their own affairs and in their own Parliament. It is not likely that petitions will flood into Parliament, but they will on certain occasions.

It seems to me that this legislation not only enhances that historic right to petition Parliament but enlarges the responsibility of the Government of the day to respond to the petitioners with either an acceptance or a rejection in part or in whole. At least a response shows that those petitions were acted upon and did not lie on the shelves in the basement of this building or in a bag behind the Speaker's chair. Surely that would embellish that sacred right to petition the Crown through Parliament.

There will be those of shallow mind and intellect who will write editorials about obstructing Parliament. If the day ever comes that Parliament would construe the presentation of petitions by one or one million and one citizens, rightly or wrongly, as an obstruction of Parliament, the parliamentary democracy is in even greater jeopardy. I invite the House, the Chair and the Table Officers not only to reconsider the process of the presentation of petitions but to act upon referring the subject matter of the Hon. Member's Bill in the last minute of this Private Members' Hour to the appropriate standing committee. That committee can report back to the House with recommendations for changes to our Routine Proceedings, our rules and treatment of petitions. I assure you, Mr. Speaker, that this will enhance this ancient and honourable right as well as enhance this Parliament.

**Mr. Maurice Harquail (Restigouche):** Mr. Speaker, I want to join other Members in congratulating the Hon. Member for Wetaskiwin (Mr. Schellenberger) for introducing Private Members Bill C-642 in the House. I can also understand and share in the *raison d'être* for bringing this Bill forward this afternoon. It is linked to the word frustration. From time to time Hon. Members will raise matters in the House and appear not to receive the information that is deemed to be duly required. There is no question that the matter of petitions is very much at the heart of the operation of this institution. Indeed, petitions are referred to in the Orders of the Day and the Business of the House. When one reads the agenda, it includes Routine Business, Reports from Special or Standing Committees, Tabling of Documents, Statements by Ministers, and Petitions, followed by the balance of the agenda dealing with Government business.

There are other avenues open to Members, such as the daily Question Period, in order to make inquiries about matters relating to petitions in an attempt to elicit direct and specific responses from Ministers who are responsible for an issue relating to their Department. As well, there is the tabling of questions on the Order Paper, which is available to all Members. Members who are concerned about a specific matter may also use the proceedings on adjournment when they feel they may have not been successful in obtaining a full answer to a question dealing with a petition. They can raise that subject matter in the House at that time as provided for within our rules and procedures.

The purpose of the Hon. Member's Bill is to have this matter referred to the committee so that some teeth can be put into the procedures of bringing forward petitions. This is why I congratulated the Hon. Member for introducing the Bill. As other Members have mentioned, this legislation could provide a mechanism through which a direct response could be given to a petition in the House of Commons. I support that and applaud it. However, I feel there are other existing avenues which have been available to all Members with respect to the current special committee which is studying all aspects of the operations of the House of Commons. It is the Special Committee on Parliamentary Reform which is reviewing the operation, rules and procedures of the House of Commons.

Based on the effort that has gone into the preparation of Private Members' Bill C-642, it has been suggested that the Hon. Member should be encouraged to present his proposition to this Committee at the earliest opportunity so that it could be made aware of his concerns and his recommendations. He could attempt to convince the Committee to include the very items in his Bill in their recommendations to the House. Perhaps the Committee will agree with some of the provisions of the Bill, an Act respecting the presentation of petitions, such as Clause 4 which states:

When answer to a petition is made, the Member presenting the petition may, forthwith and without further debate, move that the subject matter of the petition stand referred to any committee of the Senate, House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament that may be established to study and report upon petitions.