

What I am saying today is not new. Attitudinal change in relation to the confidence convention and freer voting was one of the major recommendations of the special committee on reform of the House of Commons in 1985. This committee even went so far as to categorize the types of confidence votes so that on all other matters private members, at least on the government side, would feel free to vote against the government position without fear of bringing down the government.

It is appropriate to recognize that today's Minister of Foreign Affairs represented the Liberal Party and the hon. member for Winnipeg Transcona represented the NDP on that committee.

While in opposition the government participated in other committees and advanced a policy paper on January 19, 1993 on reform of the House of Commons. This also formed part of the red book giving more freedom to members to voice their concerns in the House.

Leadership on this issue must come from the government. A clear statement should be made by the Prime Minister that dissent will be allowed and only certain legislative matters will be looked upon as confidence matters requiring strict party discipline.

It must also be made clear that anyone exercising independence will not be punished. Opposition parties must agree to this so that their members are free to voice their own views. It is also important that opposition parties not treat government members voting against the government line as special or as lightning rods of dissent within the government caucus.

Opposition parties should not call on the government to resign if a few of its members break with party discipline or if the government loses the occasional vote in the House or in committee.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that this change of attitude will require political courage on the part of all concerned. For the first few times that members break with party discipline the media will pounce on the situation as a sign of weak leadership. Political parties must resist the temptation to capitalize on this. In fact they should stress that allowing dissent is a sign of strength.

While we listened with interest to the speech from the throne and the promise of the government to create a greater opportunity for members to contribute to the level of public policy and legislation, I was disappointed that no specifics of how this was to be done were presented.

The Address

If members are to become a vital part of the policy making process in committee and in the House then dissent must be allowed to be articulated and occur without retribution.

If this occurs the House of Commons may become a more accurate reflection of Canadian public opinion and the policies of government may become more attuned to the needs of Canadians.

It is unfortunate that the Bloc in its amendment had not dealt with the major issue of parliamentary reform, that is free votes and relaxation of the confidence convention. Then I would have moved a subamendment in this House as follows:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government should permit members of the House of Commons to fully represent their constituents' views on the government's legislative program and spending plans, or, by adopting the position that the defeat of any government measure including a spending measure, shall not automatically mean the defeat of the government unless followed by the adoption of a formal motion.

• (1315)

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for recognizing me today. I thank the voters of Mission—Coquitlam for placing their trust in me.

Mr. Dennis J. Mills (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Industry): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by congratulating the member on her maiden address in the Parliament of Canada. She touched on the very important issue of the freedom of members of Parliament to express the views of their constituents and not be reprimanded.

I rise as a member of the government party to clarify a position of our party. It would be unfair to leave the impression with the viewing audience or Canadians in general that we on the government side do not have the ability to be creative, to debate our views, or even to have the ultimate option of dissenting or not supporting a particular government measure. I want to try to explain the fine line.

In our party we have always been encouraged to work at new ideas and develop policy initiatives. We debate them in our caucus committees and at our policy conventions. From those experiences we ultimately develop a consensus and a party position. Once a party position is taken we have to decide whether or not we want to continue as members of that party.

In our particular case we as members of the Liberal Party signed on to campaign under the red book. It would be inappropriate for us not to support the measures in the red book, seeing as that is in fact what got us elected. However that does not preclude us from participating in debate in committee or in the House.

Having been a member of the past Parliament I just want to say to the member that there was more than one occasion when we constructively debated publicly in the House. Some of us had