

Procedure and Organization

country that parliament is no longer an effective or useful body.

• (3:20 p.m.)

This general attitude on the part of the present government is demonstrated even more forcibly by the absenteeism of ministers and Liberal members during debates. Their absenteeism in this session has been notorious. Last Thursday the house had to adjourn for lack of a quorum. I think it was a very good thing it did, because attendance of ministers and Liberal members has been considerably better since than was the case before. In addition, there has been more life in the house. The house has resembled what it used to be 10 or 15 years ago instead of what it has been during the past months when generally it was dead. Few ministers were here and few questions went back and forth. There was no fight to the proceedings. Since the house had to adjourn last Thursday things have improved from this point of view.

In my view this action should and could have been taken long before. During the last six sitting days of June I noted at times when I was in the house that a quorum was not present, and I do not know how many other times there was not a quorum when I was not in the house. I counted between six to nine Liberal members present, and frequently no cabinet minister. Absenteeism has been going on for a considerable period, but I hope the action taken last Thursday will bring this extreme form of it to an end. I do not think there is any doubt that what this extreme absenteeism demonstrated was nothing but a lack of regard for this institution, the adoption of the attitude that what happens here does not matter.

An hon. Member: It happens with all parties.

Mr. Harkness: I will come to that. Absenteeism has been a problem since I first came to this house in 1945, particularly on Mondays and Fridays. In my early days here there used to be what was known as the Tuesday to Thursday club, people who came here for those three days, spending the remainder of the week with their law business or something else. This club comprised people who lived within a reasonably short distance from Ottawa. The quorum was maintained on Mondays and Fridays chiefly by members from the west and the maritime provinces.

Mr. Howard (Okanagan Boundary): Would the hon. member permit a question?

[Mr. Harkness.]

Mr. Harkness: Certainly.

Mr. Howard (Okanagan Boundary): May I ask the hon. member how many opposition members were present in the house at the time the count was made last Thursday?

Mr. Harkness: I was not here at the time so I cannot answer that question.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Harkness: I do not mind admitting that.

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): We pulled out.

Mr. Harkness: My point is that there were only 6, 7 or 8 Liberal members. It is the members of the government who have the primary responsibility for maintaining a quorum in the house. They know they were very much at fault on that occasion, as they have been for months as far as attendance is concerned. They are now attempting to escape the odium that naturally falls on them as a result of what happened last Thursday by claiming that members of the opposition were not here in sufficient numbers either. As I said, the primary responsibility for maintaining a quorum rests with members of the Liberal party, not with the opposition.

I make no apology for, or condone for one moment absenteeism on the part of opposition members during the past year, though by comparison it has been much less than among the members of the Liberal party. Attendance of opposition members at times has not been as good as it should, and I would be the last to say that that was not the case. But it has been much better than attendance of government members, and anyone who has kept track must be appalled at how bad is the record of the Liberal party in this regard.

As I mentioned earlier, the excuse given for introducing rule 75c, and also the other rules that have been put into effect to curtail debate in this house during the past number of years, has been that it is necessary to save the time of the house and get through the great volume of work we have to handle. From my experience I contend this is a fallacy to a large extent.

In fact, it works the other way around. You might say there is a law similar to Parkinson's law, which is that debate is always prolonged to use up all of the time allotted. I think the President of the Privy Council and members of the Liberal party should keep that in mind. Since Parkinson's law is now