

*Government Orders*

by anyone's standards, regardless of their view on the matter, and needs to be debated adequately in the House of Commons, especially at second reading where the principle of the issue is to be debated. To dispose of second reading after only a few hours of parliamentary debate last Thursday and today is clearly an abomination.

• (1520)

As you said on April 14, 1987:

It is essential to our democratic system that controversial issues should be debated at reasonable length so that every reasonable opportunity shall be available to hear the arguments pro and con and that reasonable delaying tactics should be permissible to enable opponents of a measure to enlist public support for their point of view.

NAFTA is certainly a controversial issue and should therefore be debated at reasonable length. It is, as the Action Canada Network said in a press release this morning, an international treaty which Canadians, through their elected members of Parliament, must have an opportunity to analyse and debate in an open public forum.

In your decision of April 14, 1987 you said:

The fundamental rights of members can be violated by the tactics of obstruction as well as by the unreasonable restriction of debate.

I agree. On that occasion you were concerned about the deadlock that had been produced on Bill C-22 as a result of certain opposition tactics.

Today we are faced with the other danger to the fundamental rights of members that you correctly identified in that decision, an unreasonable restriction of debate. For if a day and a half at second reading on something like NAFTA is not unreasonable one has to ask the question: What would be called unreasonable? Would just a day be called unreasonable but a day and a half called reasonable? Both are an unreasonable restriction of debate and should not be tolerated. This is why we appeal to you as the guardian of the House, which you are, Mr. Speaker.

Since 1988 we have seen closure used 17 times, almost as many times as in the whole history of Parliament, and time allocation, which I am objecting to today, used even more often than that. Indeed, thanks to the unilateral changes in the rules of the House in April 1991, time

allocation, which used to be regarded as the more moderate way of limiting debate, is now more convenient and easy for the government than closure itself, and the practice of using time allocation has accordingly become more attractive.

Surely there is a limit, a line beyond which the rights and responsibilities of Parliament itself are abrogated when important issues are immediately time allocated, without the opposition having time to debate such crucial issues and to take whatever political responsibility there may be for a certain amount of delay. The expectation of the Canadian people is that time allocation is something that governments enact in exasperation over a prolonged debate, not after a day and a half.

To enact time allocation without even allowing a reasonable debate on NAFTA violates every legitimate perception of how Parliament should work and the occasional need for governments to bring an end to debate.

I am fully aware that I am asking you to do something out of the ordinary, something new. But you are a new Speaker, new in the sense that you are the first to be elected by the whole House by secret ballot. You are a creature and servant of the House in a way that no previous Canadian Speaker has ever been, no matter how good previous Speakers may have been in their own right. You have the authority, I believe, if you choose to use it, to do what might otherwise be seen as unacceptable, at least by some.

The situation cries out for your intervention. Indeed, as you said yourself, in the decision of April 14, 1987: "there comes a time when the Chair has to face its responsibilities" and permit what in previous circumstances might have been ruled unacceptable by modifying or varying an earlier decision. I might add here, modifying or varying an earlier tradition.

An eminent parliamentary authority, Josef Redlich, which you have quoted yourself on occasion, has said that it is the duty of the Speaker to serve the majority and the minority "by maintaining the rules and the usage of centuries and by taking care that both majority and minority are not impeded in the use of the forces and the weapons which the order of business provides for the