

Government Orders

Reform members are pleased to see that the concluding paragraph of the motion directs the standing committee to examine procedures which would facilitate the institution of these measures. Because these measures are frequently misunderstood in some quarters and maligned in others, I would like to add to the comments of the member for Lethbridge earlier in the day and just comment briefly on the importance of each.

Let me start with the institution of free votes. If one is a so-called backbencher in the House, in other words if one is not a member of the cabinet, then there is no single reform that I would commend to such members for increasing our influence in this place and our ability to represent our constituents than the institution of freer votes.

The Reform MPs have challenged the Prime Minister and do so again to become the first Prime Minister to truly liberate MPs from excessive party discipline. As I said in my reply to the speech from the throne, this could be accomplished if the Prime Minister were simply to rise in his place and say: "Mr. Speaker, the government will not consider the defeat of a government motion, including a spending measure, to constitute an expression of non-confidence in the government unless it is immediately followed by the passage of a formal non-confidence motion".

If the Prime Minister were to take this simple step, what would be the practical consequences? We would not, as the Prime Minister suggested the other day in response to a question, see the House dissolve into a Parliament of 295 independent members. Under the freer vote convention we proposed we would still have parties. On most issues on which our platforms and commitments were clear and we were elected on the basis of those platforms and commitments we would continue to vote, for the most part, in accordance with those mandates.

However, if from time to time there arose issues on which our constituents clearly wanted us to vote contrary to the party line we should have the freedom in this House to do so without being censured by our colleagues or maligned by the media as dissidents or pressured by party whips or party leaders to vote against our constituents' interests.

● (1715)

If we also relaxed the confidence convention in this House in favour of freer votes on estimates and individual spending measures, we would not be destroying the capacity of the government to carry a budget. We would simply be implementing recommendations by previous committees of this House to which the Auditor General again drew our attention in his latest report.

I want to quote four sections from his report and ask this House to come back to this subject. Paragraph 1.22 states in part:

However, committees are spending less and less time on the estimates. One major reason for this apparent lack of interest lies in the impact of the confidence convention, which, as currently interpreted, makes any motion to change a vote in the estimates a potential test of the House's confidence in the government. Because failure to win a confidence vote leads to the resignation of the government, no changes can be made in the estimates, even though committees have the power—at least in theory—to reduce or reject estimate votes.

Paragraph 1.28 states:

In 1988, the public accounts committee expressed concern about the adequacy of Parliament's scrutiny of the estimates—. The committee recommended to the House that a new "budget committee" be set up to remedy these deficiencies, and that "the government not consider a reduction in the estimates as a matter of non-confidence".

In paragraph 5.114 of the report it is stated:

Opening up the budget process to allow parliamentarians to participate would certainly contribute to a more meaningful dialogue on deficits, debt and the expectations of the public. However there would still remain the stumbling block known in our parliamentary institution as the confidence convention: the notion that the party forming the government must be able to demonstrate that it enjoys the support of a majority of the members of the House of Commons on most pieces of financial legislation. The standing committee on House management noted in its April 1993 report on reforming the House that to change this confidence convention does not require amendments to the standing orders of the House of Commons. Rather it requires a better understanding of the rights and responsibilities of individual members and a recognition that "Canadians want to feel that their members of Parliament have opportunities to vote freely and they expect them to do it more often".

Finally paragraph 1.31 states:

A recommendation in April 1993 by the standing committee on House management dealt with the convention of confidence. It stated that "with few exceptions, motions proposed by the government should be considered as motions of confidence only when clearly identified as such by the government". The committee felt that this, together with deleting some references to confidence in the rules of procedure, could help in opening up the budget process.

If we relaxed the confidence convention in this House in favour of freer votes, a few government measures including spending measures would be defeated. Under the freer vote convention we proposed that would not automatically mean defeat of the government. If a government measure were defeated because a number of government members voted against it, that defeated motion would immediately be followed by a formal confidence motion. In that vote government members would most likely support the government.

However by adopting the free vote convention we proposed, government backbenchers would have acquired for themselves and for this House the right to kill a bill or a portion of a bill without killing the government.