

The Constitution

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Dufferin-Simcoe): Mr. Speaker, at the outset of my remarks I want to say how moving it was to be here in the House of Commons to hear the maiden speech made by my colleague, the hon. member for Vancouver Centre (Miss Carney), this evening. It should have been a moment of great joy, a tremendous opportunity and a great pleasure to be able to make her first remarks in debate as a member of the House of Commons, just as for so many of us it should have been a period of happiness because, one week from this evening, a number of us, including my leader, myself and my colleague, the hon. member for Provencher (Mr. Epp), our spokesman for federal-provincial relations, will be celebrating some eight years as members of the House of Commons. So one would have expected that this would have been a happy occasion for us. Instead, it represents for so many of us the saddest days of our parliamentary career.

What we see today is a decision that Parliament be gagged, that this institution, which we joined with so much pride eight years ago, and which my colleague from Vancouver Centre joined so recently, is to be rendered impotent by the government majority.

Already earlier today a vote was taken to say that on the most profound, essential and central matter facing the country today, the unity of Canada, our very survival as a country, Parliament is to be silenced. The Liberal members voted one after another, without dissent, to silence Parliament.

Yesterday when the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) gave notice of his intention to move that closure be put into place, he did so after 24 hours of debate in this House of Commons on this resolution; he did so after, out of 145 Liberals, 22 had spoken; he did so after only 19 of the Progressive Conservatives, out of 102, had spoken, leaving 83 who had not been heard; and he did so after 5 members of the NDP had spoken out of a total of 32, leaving 27 who had not.

This will be the fourth time in the last 25 years in which this rule has been invoked to gag Parliament. Let us take a look at those three other times. It was done once in 1969 when the government decided that they wanted to change the rules of Parliament, so they invoked closure to do that. They did so after the recommendations of the standing committee on parliamentary reform had been tabled in June of 1968, and they were debated until December, 1968, because the opposition objected to rule 75c which would allow the government to limit debate on each stage of a bill without agreement from any other party. The matter was referred back to the committee in December of 1968, and it was retabled in the House on June 20, 1969, and debated until closure was invoked on July 24. That was the last time that this rule was used, but you can see at least the extent to which Parliament was given an opportunity to be heard before the Liberal government moved.

When was the previous time? It was in 1964 in the flag debate. Again the Liberal government voted to prevent Parliament from speaking any further. The flag debate was begun on June 15, 1964, and concluded on December 15, 1964, several months later. When the debate ended in December, every Conservative MP, except for two, had spoken at least once,

three had spoken five times, seven had spoken four times, and nineteen had spoken three times. In all, 92 Conservatives made 195 speeches during the debate. At that time 34 Liberals spoke 41 times, 10 NDP members made 17 speeches, eight Social Credit MPs delivered 12 speeches, and six Cr ditiste members spoke 13 times.

The Liberals on that occasion moved to prevent Parliament from debating the matter further, but you can get some idea, Mr. Speaker, of what they thought in the mid-1960s about limiting Parliament's right to speak. At least members had had a chance to be heard. We objected to the imposition of closure, but at least on that occasion members had a chance to be heard.

When was the first time in the past 25 years that closure was invoked? It was in the pipeline debate which started on May 17, 1956, and ended on June 5, 1956, on Black Friday, as you will remember, Mr. Speaker. It lasted 15 House days from the day when the bill was introduced until closure. Yesterday, after 24 hours of debate on the constitution of this country, on the national future of this country, the President of the Privy Council announced that he was moving to gag Parliament. The country was outraged in 1956, on Black Friday, when the Liberal government of the day moved to gag Parliament after 15 sitting days, and indeed that government was defeated at the next election. And yet today the government moves after 24 hours of debate in the House on the most fundamental law of the land.

I listened earlier this evening as the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) complained about the acrimony in this debate. He said that there was too much anger and he said he hoped that later this evening members of this House would agree to allow this matter to go to committee without even a recorded vote. He said that he hoped we would ask the committee of the House, where this bill will be sent, to deal with the matter in a spirit of good will. If anger is not justified when members of the House of Commons find their most fundamental right and responsibility taken away from them, ruthlessly denied by the government majority, when would the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre feel it was justified?

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

● (2030)

Mr. Beatty: As someone seen by Canadians from coast to coast as the prime defender of Parliament, when would he feel it was justified to be angry? If there is no justification in being angry tonight, when Canadians with very deep feelings about the country see its future being threatened by the action of the government, when would anger be justified? When would the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre feel it was appropriate that we stand up and be counted, that there be a vote, that it not be sent to committee without a vote?

I have compared the decision to invoke closure in this debate with the experience of the past. I have indicated my abhorrence and the abhorrence of members on this side at the gagging of Parliament. Today in Question Period my leader,