

Government Orders

The Conservative government has come a long way since 1985 and is now in stark contrast to the recommendations of the McGrath report which indeed sought to enhance the involvement of the private member of Parliament and did so in a number of ways such as increased powers for committees, and rules which permitted private members' bills to come forward for debate in this House in a much more expeditious fashion. That was the spirit that prevailed in 1985, enhancing the role of the private member of Parliament.

Today, a scant six years later, the Conservative government is proposing changes to the rules of this House which will diminish the role of the private member of Parliament, and will indeed reduce and minimize the role of Parliament in our parliamentary system.

I must say that I find it obscene that we are even dealing with this subject this week. There are 1.5 million unemployed Canadians. Unemployment has reached levels which we have not seen since 1985. Canada is losing its ability to compete in the global economy. Last week the chairman of the Science Council of Canada wrote in an article published in *The Ottawa Citizen* that Canada does not have a science policy and that in the global economy in which we live, Canada is falling further and further behind.

• (1530)

I need hardly remind members that we are embroiled once again in a national unity crisis and that the opposition has been asking the government to include the House of Commons and all members of Parliament in the process of finding a solution.

Rather than debating these questions, we are debating a proposal by the Conservative government to diminish Parliament and to diminish the role of Parliament in our parliamentary system.

I would hope that government members, the Government House leader in particular, who is responsible for these proposals, will listen to the debate, listen to the carefully thought-out comments of members and that they will go back to the drawing board, withdraw these rules and come up with proposals which again will enhance the role of members of Parliament, as was recommended by the McGrath report six years ago, rather than seeking to diminish the role of members of Parliament and to diminish the role of Parliament together in our parliamentary system.

Mr. George S. Rideout (Moncton): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate my colleague on an excellent address. Perhaps he could explain for us, as we listened to what he had to say, about the McGrath commission and the fact that that was only a few years ago.

What really has taken place to cause us to have to revisit these rule changes. We just really started to work with them, and we were making some progress so that some parliamentarians had an opportunity to try to represent their constituencies. We see again the heavy hand of the government with the abuse of closure, and the abuse of process here in the House over the last number of years, and now these rule changes moving in the same direction.

Can he identify anything that causes us to really look at changes over and above what McGrath had suggested to us?

Mr. Berger: Mr. Speaker, it is hard for me to read the mind of the government and to try and conclude, or try to figure out why these changes are being presented to us here today. All I can say to the hon. member is that it did not take a long time after 1985 for the enthusiasm for parliamentary reform to wane. I remember that in 1985 one of the changes was the establishment of much smaller committees where committees of six or seven members were struck. That was supposed to enable greater specialization by members, and it was supposed to permit the development of certain teamwork among members of Parliament from all sides.

Again, to give the specific example of a committee I am familiar with, the House established a committee on research, science and technology, because it was perceived, and indeed the Prime Minister had promised in the Speech from the Throne, I think in 1984 or 1985, to establish a specialized committee of this House to deal with questions of research, science and technology because they were considered to be so important for the country's future.

About two years later, a number of these small committees were put together in much larger committees. Research, science and technology disappeared and it was grouped together with Industry, Small Business, Northern and Regional Development. The specialization which just a year or two before had been regarded to be so important was thrown out the window.