

British North America Act

to reverse something the previous government had done. In his opinion the responsibility rested upon the government.

However, he looked back to see whether such an astonishing thing had happened before and was unable to find that their House of Commons had ever been counted out in that manner. They take extra precautions over there. In order to avoid counting out there is an arrangement that during the dinner hour—and I interpolate that their house meets from 2.30 in the afternoon until 10.30 with no adjournment for dinner—from 7.30 to 8.30 in the evening, no count shall be taken. During the course of the day if there is a count-out before four p.m. the house simply stands adjourned until that hour and then resumes business. They do not have to wait until the following day. It is only when the count-out occurs after 8.30 in the evening that the rules provide for adjournment of the house until the following day. I think it is obvious that their quorum is kept at a low figure in order to avoid unnecessary interruption of the business of the house.

I come now to another matter in the presentation of my hon. friend to which I take exception, the idea of compulsory attendance. As I understood him, he thought it would be wiser for us here to have more people sitting in the chamber under the compulsion of a higher quorum than to carry on as we are doing at present. I do not think the question of compulsory attendance, if it ever arises—I hope it will not—should be linked up with the question of a quorum. I believe there are two different things involved. I believe the quorum serves its own purpose, and that the question of compulsory attendance is separate and apart.

My hon. friend has suggested that even when several committees are meeting it should be possible to have more members in the house. It is an extraordinarily difficult task to determine why a member is not in the chamber at the particular time you yourself happen to be present, and I think we simply have to assume that other members are absent from the chamber for the same reasons that would cause me, my hon. friend, or any of us to be absent. There are committee meetings, there is correspondence, there are visitors who come at unexpected moments, and one could never determine at any given moment that a person should be here in the chamber and not elsewhere.

If you were to insert a suggestion of compulsion, then we would lose a little of the small amount of freedom we have. On the ground of compulsory attendance alone I would be inclined to oppose this bill. I think

[Mr. Churchill.]

there are ways and means for people to be called to account if their attendance in the House of Commons is not what some think it should be. Surely it has to be left to the members themselves to determine when they shall be in the chamber and when they shall be elsewhere.

Mr. Ivor Jennings, from whom I quoted before, has noticed that over in the United Kingdom they have the same trouble with attendance. I shall just give this short sentence from page 76. He says:

It is obviously not necessary that members should be in the chamber itself. They must be somewhere near the fount of oratory, but they need not drink. The visitor to the house is, in fact, impressed with the multifarious duties which members find to perform when an ordinary member is speaking in an ordinary debate. The hon. member may be addressing almost empty benches.

Well, that has happened to many of us here in the short experience that some of us have had. Nevertheless we are all well aware that when matters of vital importance to the state are being discussed here in the House of Commons, the place is filled. When matters of somewhat less importance are being discussed, people find it useful to do other things. By and large, the business of the country is carried on and most members are available when needed. We need only recall the occasions when the bell rings for a division, and the scores of people who appear whom we may have thought were not anywhere near this chamber. Consequently I think the idea of compulsory attendance should be entirely removed from this discussion. If the proposal to increase the quorum to 30 is based on the idea of compulsory attendance, it should be defeated on that ground.

I conclude by simply saying that the quorum is set at an arbitrary figure merely to get things going and to ensure that the business shall be conducted in an orderly fashion. There is no hint of compulsory attendance behind it; it is merely a method of having the business of the house conducted in an orderly fashion. I think we should avoid at all times any possibility of a count-out of the house. It would be embarrassing to both sides, and it would be bad for public relations. If we keep the quorum at the low figure it now is, I think we will avoid having a count-out. We can be sure there will be members in the chamber or nearby at all times in case an urgent matter comes up.

Mr. Clarence Gillis (Cape Breton South): Ordinarily I do not take part in a debate of this kind, Mr. Speaker. It is procedural, and there are a lot of technicalities attached to it. In listening to the discussion this afternoon I