

British North America Act

to support this proposal for the abolition of the other place.

Mr. Churchill: I wonder whether the hon. member will permit me to ask a question, without indicating that I am for or against this bill? Has he considered whether or not the power which resides in the Senate might usefully be used for the protection of the rights of the people, if the growing power of the executive in this country were used to the disadvantage of the liberties of the people?

Mr. Knowles: I recognize the problem my friend the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre has raised, namely the contest between the executive and parliament. I think the place for the contest to be resolved is right here, between the executive and the elected House of Commons. I think we will have even more problems if, as against the authority of the members of parliament speaking for the people, we have two bodies, namely the executive here and the Senate over in the other place. I recognize the problem he has raised, but I think the use of the Senate to resolve that problem would be futile.

• (5:30 p.m.)

Mr. Richard Cashin (St. John's West): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to discuss this evening the matter of our political institutions. As we know, in recent months—in fact, in recent years—the political institutions of this country have come in for some severe criticism. I must say, although I suppose it casts a reflection on some of those who are observers of our political institutions, there has been a noticeable lack of any in-depth analysis of the political institutions of this country. I believe this is unfortunate because I feel that those outside parliament could do more than they are doing to shape and inform public opinion on this very important matter.

We are discussing specifically this evening one aspect of our political institutions, namely the Senate. I think however that in this discussion we ought to bear in mind that our political institutions generally were taken 100 years ago from England. The ideals of parliamentary democracy in England and as they have been developed here are indeed very laudable. I believe however that one is not at all unpatriotic in saying that there may be some serious questions which Canadians ought to be asking about the function of our parliamentary institutions. After all, these

institutions in our country were formulated and devised in a unitary state and have been adopted in a federal state which has great regional diversity, and the further complication of being bilingual. Perhaps one of the major weaknesses of our political institutions is that they do not permit an ample and proper reflection of this regional diversity in our country.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, when we are talking about the reform or abolition of one segment of our political institutions, really the more serious and pressing question is their analysis in depth. There are two reasons for my finding it difficult to agree with the hon. member who has introduced this bill. One is that if we are to do what he asks today, I think we would not be accomplishing very much in terms of what needs to be accomplished in reforming and re-examining our whole parliamentary institution.

While this particular matter may be distasteful and offend the principles of democracy as espoused by the hon. member, I believe it is an academic question. I recognize the importance of his arguments but nevertheless feel that because of other practical difficulties, if we allow his distaste to linger a little longer, a man with his knowledge of the rules of this house, his love for parliament and perhaps his agitation in this matter, may be helpful to those on all sides of the house who would like to see reform in a more meaningful sense in our parliamentary institutions. This is one of the main reasons I find it difficult to support the hon. member's bill.

I shall deal with that matter a little later, but I would point out that one feature of the hon. member's bill makes it impossible for me to give it my support. However, Mr. Speaker, I will return to that subject in a moment because it is a very important matter that I do not believe has been discussed. Perhaps I may mention it now. One of the arguments that is used—and I have read the debate that occurred on April 6 two years ago on this matter—was the constitutional guarantees given to the provinces of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia in relation to the number of members they shall have in this house. I would inform the house, for those who are not aware of the situation, that in my view this is no longer a practical matter because some very serious anomalies are apt to develop, particularly in regard to members of parliament from the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba and particularly Newfoundland.