

NDP spokesmen in British Columbia are saying that we have now created the Senate as a paper tiger.

In only four majority governments could 100 per cent of the senators opposed to government legislation have defeated the government, and they would all have to vote together, which would be a minor miracle. Put another way, 60 per cent of the senators opposed to legislation could only defeat a majority government with 51.7 per cent or less of the seats, and 100 per cent of the senators opposed to legislation could only defeat a majority government with 59.1 per cent or less of the seats. If the figures analysis is extended back to the 1930s the same results are obtained.

It is a hoax and it is a fraud to suggest that the new elected Senate would exert any meaningful power on decisions made in this country. Ordinary legislation which is debated and approved in the House of Commons, but defeated in the Senate, would go to a joint Commons-Senate vote where its fate would be sealed—again, within 30 short days. No more battles about the goods and services tax. No more battles about drug prices. No more battles about crucial issues affecting the Canadian people. Muzzle any controversy in 30 days.

Senator Murray: No more time.

Senator Perrault: Honourable senators, I would ask for an extension of time.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: I take it, honourable senators, it is agreed that the time be extended.

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Perrault: Together with all of this, few people, including members of the media, realize the extent to which Senate power has been eroded in recent months. If one compares the powers of the Senate to the new rules imposed on the Senate, this is a crippled chamber.

In recent months, changes to the rules of the Senate forced through following the GST debate virtually emasculate the opposition. The Senate Speaker has been given broad new power to control events in the chamber, even though he is appointed directly by the Prime Minister, instead of being elected by his peers, as is done in the House of Commons.

The Speaker of the Senate has now been given the authority to cancel or delay indefinitely a scheduled sitting of the Senate. If he decides, for whatever reason, or following direction from the Prime Minister, that the Senate will not meet for the next six months, there is absolutely nothing anyone can do to have the Senate meet earlier. Most of those in the media seem not to be aware of this. I wonder if the members in the other place are aware of what has happened in this chamber.

The Speaker of the Senate has now been given the authority to cut off debate on any points of order and questions of privilege, matters that concern the operation of the Senate itself, and traditionally determined by the members.

I would like to pose the following scenario. Imagine the "reformed" Senate with its 62 members. Remove the two

[Senator Perrault.]

leaders and the two spokespersons on a bill and 58 senators remain. Even if every one of them spoke for the full 15 minutes, debate would be over in 14.5 hours. If the government members chose not to speak, the debate could be concluded in half that time. I will not go into all the rest of the details of the recent changes to the Senate rules. I suggest to honourable senators who have not read them that they open the book and be horrified.

I welcome the announcement by Mr. Chrétien who stated that when he becomes Prime Minister—and that cannot come too soon—he will make a priority an attempt to make the new Senate and its rules more effective. Mr. Chrétien has said that before a new Senate is elected, there would be some time to work on rules respecting, for example, the time that must pass between the defeat of a bill in the Senate and the convocation of a joint session of the Senate and the House of Commons. He believes that the rules for a joint session could also be structured in such a way as to ensure real debate. That kind of commitment by Jean Chrétien is encouraging.

However, the fundamental changes proposed are bad for the Senate. The constitutional package, I believe, fails utterly to provide for a new more powerful, effective Senate empowered to protect the rights of minorities and to provide the people of Canada's regions with enhanced representation in Ottawa.

Before this package is accepted, I hope changes are made. Even if significant changes in Senate rules are made by a new government, I fear that the new Senate will be stripped of any real powers and could be converted into little more than an expensive talk shop.

The so-called "reformed" Senate could become a benign and toothless tabby cat—able to gum issues, but never able to interfere in any meaningful way with the decisions of the House of Commons and directives from the office of the Prime Minister.

Obviously, the premiers and the current Prime Minister want it that way. So much for the goal of a better Constitution and a more united Canada.

Today I brought to the chamber with me an amendment I had hoped to place before honourable senators. However, after conferring with the Leader of the Government in the Senate and with others on both sides, I have made the decision not to proceed because my initiative would not succeed and I would not want to cause another divisive factor to enter this debate here in the Senate. However, I would like to read my proposed wording and I hope the government will consider acceptance of this suggested amendment. It is as follows:

That the motion be amended by striking out the words that come after the words "the following", and by substituting therefor:

That texts of two referendum questions, to be put at the same time:

With the exception of proposals relating to the House of Commons and the Senate, do you agree that the