

*Government Orders*

Our proposal disappeared into the great bureaucratic maw, and what came out instead was a proposal that would diminish the absolutely fundamental parliamentary activities.

This is totally unacceptable.

Thus, we see that the government's parliamentary timetable, presented as a vehicle for efficiency and effectiveness, is in fact just another power grab, just another attempt to reduce the means for holding the government to account to Parliament and through Parliament to the people of Canada.

This desire to silence the opposition is reflected not only in the timetable proposals but also in a series of proposals regarding the length of speeches and debates.

Arguing that the reduction in annual sitting days ought to bring about a corresponding reduction in the number of days that are devoted to the already limited-by-rule debates, the government proposes to reduce the debate on the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne from eight days to six days.

In its drafting the government has also eliminated the opportunity for the opposition and for a third party to move a second amendment or subamendment, thereby eliminating yet two more opportunities for the confidence of the House in the government to be tested.

The address debate, more colloquially known as the throne speech debate, is a unique event in a session in that it gives members virtually unlimited scope to raise in Parliament all issues that they consider worthy of attention and action.

The session opens with the Speech from the Throne by the Governor General in which the government's priorities are outlined. Government backbenchers then propose an address in reply, thanking the Governor General for his or her speech. The opposition proposes amendments to the address in which issues that it deems require different or greater attention are raised. By the end of the debate, members have had a wide opportunity to deal in general with the state of the nation and are ready to get down to specifics.

In a House which has grown to 300 members, this was a real opportunity for backbenchers in all political parties to come to the House and to express their views during

the throne speech debate on a variety of issues, some national, some regional and, yes, some which were of particular significance to their constituency. I recall that in 1980 as a backbencher when we were in government having that opportunity to express the concern of my constituents. It was an opportunity in which I participated and I would recommend very strongly to members of Parliament, of all political parties, that they should also participate. But by reducing the number of days you are prohibiting the number of members of Parliament who have legitimate concerns, not partisan, testy issues where barbs are thrown back and forth, but a real opportunity to lay before their colleagues and members of Parliament real issues of substance and great concern.

• (1650)

I suggest at a time when our country is debating the very structure of what we wish to have in the future, by removing this opportunity for members of Parliament, it will not add in any substantive way to greater understanding, or appreciation of the regions and of the different peoples who make up this great country.

Originally there was no time limit to the address debate and in the first few years after Confederation, the address was sometimes adopted after only one day. The address in the early days was a lengthy one, sometimes with many paragraphs referring to specific government proposals in the Speech from the Throne. These were voted on separately, and amendments were infrequent.

Early in this century the address changed to a single paragraph expressing thanks for the speech and amendments commenting on the inadequacies of the government became more common. The address debate also became lengthier, culminating in a 26-day marathon in 1926 that had to be ended by closure. Originally amendments to the address were not automatically considered non-confidence items and at least twice in 1899 and as late as 1951 amendments were accepted by the government.

In 1959, however, Mr. Speaker Michener ruled that amendments had to directly challenge the government's policies. After the 1926 fiasco pressure mounted for a limitation on the length of the address debate and the establishment of a framework for consideration of amendments.