

Procedure and Organization

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The backbenchers over there have as much respect for parliament as the Prime Minister has.

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): You know, Mr. Speaker, if some of our neophyte members had had a chance of serving in the opposition as well as on the government side, and my experience is about evenly divided between both sides of the house so I ought to know what I am talking about, it would be much better for them. There must be ample opportunities for discussion. And who shall say on a particular bill affecting constituencies from one end of the country to another that such and such a frontbencher who represents his constituents and such and such a backbencher or private member who represents his constituents shall be the only ones to speak? Who is going to arrogate unto himself the role of God in saying, "You, from the province of Nova Scotia, on this particular subject, you cannot be heard; and you, from Ontario, on this subject, you will not be heard." Hon. members forget that in this house we are equals and have equal rights to speak. But no, only the exalted 27 or 28 in this house are to be given the opportunity to speak extensively.

This situation applies to the government backbenchers, if only they knew it. At present it makes no difference to them because they are not allowed to speak and will not be allowed to speak. Talk about participatory government! Here we have a government in which the front benches have lost contact with the back benches. We have all heard good stories going around of the yards and yards of ministerial skin that were scraped off walls following complaints at the Liberal love-in. Government backbenchers are overheard talking in coffee shops and elevators. They gripe and their gripes are heard by others so that they become public knowledge.

I now wish to deal with some other matters, Mr. Speaker. I am participating in this debate at this time because, as vice-chairman of the committee, I can say that the chairman who presided over the committee's sessions last year and this year, without exception, did an excellent job, and no member of that committee can point a finger at him for being partial or for not having the committee under good control. It was because he was being hamstrung and humiliated by the government that I have insisted on taking part in this debate. I am taking part to protect the position of the chairman of the committee

[Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West).]

because I feared he was going to be destroyed. But that, of course, did not seem to affect the conscience of the government house leader.

I wish to place on record as vice-chairman of the committee, and I think I speak for all members of the committee, that I appreciate the services performed by the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton (Mr. Blair). I put my remarks in those terms. I have no words of condemnation in my vocabulary that are strong enough to condemn the government's attitude in this connection. May I also say that the Leader of the Opposition indicated that there was a rumour, and he was quite right, that a motion might be brought in order to vindicate the conduct and position of the chairman. I was prepared to bring in a motion of privilege on behalf of the committee in order to protect the chairman.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): We were ready, too.

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): We just could not allow this matter to pass without making the strongest representations. Members of other committees will have to take the same steps in order to protect the position of chairmen. We have developed a committee system that will fail if we do not have strong, impartial chairmen. And, Mr. Speaker, we want our chairmen to be as free from pressure and as impartial with members of the committee as Your Honour is in the House of Commons.

In many ways our committee chairmen must be carbon copies of Mr. Speaker and display an impartiality of conduct and a knowledge of how committee meetings ought to be conducted. Otherwise our committees may become arenas for hatchet games in which government instructions will be carried out to the letter. After all, have we not heard that the government house leader has indicated to government members that their function in the committee system is not primarily to amend legislation and alter estimates, but to protect the government. They are part of the government's team and they are to act as such. Well, Mr. Speaker, the natural consequence of that is, as I said a moment ago, that the committees will become arenas for hatchet games. The whole of the process is spurious if it is felt that the committees are not going to be a forum for discussing and examining legislation and estimates and/or going into questions that the government has put before them.