

Committee to Consider Business of House

The Prime Minister made one statement that surprised me a little bit. He has moved a motion to the effect that it is desirable to repeal standing order No. 33, the closure rule, and that the matter be referred to a committee. At the same time he did something that was a little unprecedented, in that he offered a lot of advice to the committee. He stated that the closure rule is no longer necessary. He added also that never again will closure be applied. I felt that these two statements were a bit unfortunate, in that they might prejudice the thinking of the committee that is to meet. He said, too, that governments have the temptation to use the methods that the rules permit. I took down this statement as closely as I could, but there may be a word or two out of line. As I have it, he said that governments have a temptation to use the methods that the rules permit.

This has not been my experience, Mr. Speaker. I believe this is a reflection on the government of the Prime Minister, and also a reflection on past governments. In the main I can honestly report that I have always found the government of the day, whether Liberal or Conservative, rather anxious to bend over backward in order to permit the opposition to have its say. I believe that the Prime Minister is a little out of line in the aspersions he is casting not only upon his own government but also on other governments of the past when he says that governments have the temptation to use the methods that the rules permit.

Our group feel that merely because of one unhappy and unfortunate incident when the St. Laurent government applied closure unnecessarily and most prematurely—and, as events proved, it served no useful purpose; if anything it only lengthened the debate which the government of the day was seeking to curtail—this is a very poor excuse for wanting to go whole hog and completely abolish the right of the government of the day to have its way. We agree that the closure rule needs amending. However, I do maintain that after debate for a period which has been agreed upon by all parties the will of the people of Canada ought to be expressed in the form of legislation, no matter how distasteful that legislation may be to opposition groups. It ought to be left to the people of the nation at the time of the next election to express their opinion as to the deeds or misdeeds of the government of the day.

Mr. Speaker: Is the house ready for the question?

Mr. Diefenbaker: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must inform the house that if the Prime Minister speaks now he will close the debate.

[Mr. Regier.]

Mr. Diefenbaker: Mr. Speaker, it is on occasions such as this that parliament is at its best. I appreciate very much the expression of views by the hon. member for Bonavista-Twillingate. I will refer to the suggestion that he made in a moment.

If one goes back to 1957 one finds that in November of that year, I think it was, I placed a motion on the order paper which would have abolished the procedure of closure had it been accepted. Then there were other events that required attention; other matters arose, and finally there was dissolution at the end of January, 1958. I have found over the years that the novelties of today become the accepted things of tomorrow. In 1957 the press of Canada was very divided on this matter. I had stated that our view was that closure should be abolished and, as the hon. member for Bonavista-Twillingate has stated, it should never be used again. I believe that is correct. The only times it was ever used in Canada it was followed by the defeat of the government which used it, when the people had the first opportunity to vote either for or against the party that brought it into being.

Mr. Pickersgill: Not in 1917.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Oh, not in 1917, but we are not going into the history of 1917. As I recall it, the closure at that time was not brought in by the union government. I am speaking now from recollection, but I think the union government was formed afterward. Closure was used in 1917 in respect of various matters of legislation introduced by the Borden government before a union government was formed. Then many Liberals joined with the Conservatives of that day and formed the union government. In 1917 the vote had nothing to do with questions of party government; it was a vote on the necessity of a subordination of party considerations to the objective of winning the war.

In 1957, when I first dealt with this matter in Toronto at the opening of the campaign of that year, there was divided opinion expressed in the press. I have found over the years, Mr. Speaker, that when you have an objective in mind you cannot always secure it by immediate action; it takes time for public opinion to be educated. I would be the last one to bring into this amicable discussion today anything that might shatter the unanimity of the government and the official opposition, but I am sure nobody will deny me the satisfaction of saying I am happy to learn that the stand taken by this party is now accepted by the Liberal party in opposition. That shows the benefit of discussion and the results that come from taking stands that are proper, appropriate and necessary.