

Petitions to Parliament

The other day in Thunder Bay a discussion occurred between two groups of people on two different sides of the abortion issue. There were some demonstrations, and so on. The suggestion was made that maybe it is time that these two groups of people sat down and tried to understand each other. With a committee on petitions we can, perhaps, bring some of those opposing forces together on this subject or on other subjects.

I agree with this particular step, but I feel there should be more steps and broader steps to allow for that kind of thing to happen. I feel that one of the problems which creates petitions, and this kind of strife, is within the nature of large Government bureaucracies. I am not talking about this Government or any other Government particularly. It is just in the nature of the whole business of Government Departments. We have been talking about the Crow rate, for instance, and a lot of people are concerned about Government Departments. They tend to say that what is good for transportation or what is good for the railroads is good for the country, because that is what they are busy doing. That is the outlook they have. They may well be wrong about the railroads, as well as about the rest of the country, but the point is that there is a tendency to build up a whole series of things which are good for a small sector of society but may not be good for Canadians generally or any particular region of this country. Then you get people, such as a very large number of grain farmers in the West, who say, "This does not suit me at all. This is something which is part of the history of the West, I believe in it, and this group is taking it away". One can understand that, but the point is that there is not a good outlet at the present time for people who feel very strongly that the traditions they have grown up with are being trampled upon by this particular bureaucracy.

● (1700)

I happen to have a lot of contact with the peace movement in this country. It consists of a network right across the country from coast to coast. There is a real concern about where we are going with nuclear armaments and a very real concern about a war that could destroy us all. But there is no way for that large group of people to make their views heard in this Parliament. I have thousands of names on petitions because a lot of the letters that go to the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) or other Members come to me because of my concern about this issue. And some way or other that issue, and the Crow issue and others, have to be addressed. These people are getting more and more frustrated. This is not a situation where an issue comes up, everyone gets upset, and a week later it is all over. That is not what is happening. Petitions may be the route to go, but it is not now. We all agree, I think, that it is not effective at this stage of the game. As the Hon. Member for Wetaskiwin has said, petitions come in, they are read out, accepted as being correct by the Speaker, and then they are dead. It is not an exercise in total futility because at least it gets to the floor, but it is nothing more than a show. There is no debate afterwards.

I want to find some way, Mr Speaker, where the feelings of people on the Crow and those who are very concerned about testing the Cruise and who put their names on petitions and

write letters can at least be strongly expressed. Perhaps it should be in a committee where people who have opposite views can come forward, and then they will begin to understand what Governments and we in Parliament have to face. I am sure all of us have received petitions with opposite positions on the same issue. We have to deal with that. I have in my office a lot of letters and several petitions from people in the City of Thunder Bay and the surrounding area who are very concerned about the National Film Board closing down its offices in my community. It is supposed to happen in September. I checked this and I find there are seven or eight other communities and the Members who represent those communities also have a bunch of petitions on the same subject. The Cities of Saskatoon, Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Chicoutimi, Sydney, and Kingston are all going to lose their NFB offices this fall if something is not done. The Film Board will save something like \$200,000. The offices will be replaced by a Zenith telephone number, which is costly, ineffective, impersonal and so on.

I have discussed this with the Minister concerned and I think we are going to prevent that particular situation from happening. Those communities are not going to lose those offices. But the point is that it would be very effective if all the petitions dealing with that particular subject could be brought together at one particular point. In that way we could focus on the problem facing these communities. It may make sense from the point of view of the NFB to do this, but it may not make sense at all from the point of view of those communities or the country, certainly the Government, to have this happen. I know it does not.

It just happens that I have the names of those eight cities and I talked to about five of the members concerned, and I will get to the rest of them in the next few days. If those petitions went to one place, it would have a very significant effect in the sense that when they came to the particular committee, we could all go there and say we all feel strongly about this and we would be able to put the pressure on.

I would like to say in conclusion that I find this to be a very interesting Bill and I tend to support it because I can see a lot of good things happening. It seems to me that as our society becomes more complex—and nobody denies that is what is happening—and as the people in our society become more knowledgeable, given better education and so on, they begin to be much more cynical and they say "I want and demand" so and so. We in a representative democracy have to learn how we can bring those viewpoints together at some particular point. This is not the only way; there must be all kinds of things that we can think about. I hope the committee which is looking at changes of House rules will look very carefully at this kind of approach and others which would make the people in our country feel their Government is something that belongs to them and works for them. I welcome this kind of approach.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the Hon. Member's Bill C-642. I want to deal with it in the context of the history of a parliamentary democracy and