

principle that our vote on second reading will help to decide. I suggest it is not.

Stephen Leacock once described Parliament as:

—a place where men come together merely to hear the latest legislation and indulge in cheers sighs, groans, votes and other expressions of vitality.

Parliament may often resemble that description, but in spite of all it does serve the useful function of helping to focus public attention upon matters of concern and to define and delineate the considerations involved. In so doing, Parliament aids the public in coming to intelligent conclusions about the actions of government and helps individual members of the public to decide their own position on questions of importance. This whole process, so key to the effective functioning of a democratic state, is injured and perhaps even dies when the issues before Parliament become unfocused and blurred about the edges, when the manner in which they are presented lacks clarity and precision. Nothing could obscure issues better than does this bill and yet the government would have us believe that some of its provisions will strengthen our democracy.

Bernard Crick in his book, "The Reform of Parliament" had this to say:

The only meanings of parliamentary control worth considering, and worth the House spending much of its time on are those which do not threaten the parliamentary defeat of a government, but which help to keep it responsive to the underlying currents and the more important drifts of public opinion. All others are purely antiquarian shufflings. It is wholly legitimate for any modern government to do what it needs to guard against parliamentary defeat; but it is not legitimate for it to hinder parliament, particularly the opposition, from reaching the public ears effectively as it can. Governments must govern in the expectation that they can serve out their statutory period of office, that they can plan—if they choose—at least that far ahead, but that everything they do may be exposed to the light of day and that everything they say may be challenged in circumstances designed to make criticism as authoritative, informed and as public as possible.

I, in principle, accept that statement, although I would reserve the right to modify it in detail. The corollary of such a statement is that votes in the House are no longer the important control over the actions of the executive. Rather, appeals by the opposition to the electorate are the important control. The only real sanction, the only real stricture on government action now, is the prospect of defeat in the next election.

With a majority government and the well-established pattern of voting solidly by party, the votes in Parliament are virtually meaningless and are useless as a means of effecting parliamentary control. What is important in the functioning of Parliament is the opportunity for discussion. What is important in the functioning of Parliament is the quality of the discussion conducted. What is important in the functioning of Parliament is that discussion be focused. How in heavens name can discussion be focused when a bill includes at least five different matters of principle? How are the gentlemen in the press gallery going to impose an order and a theme upon a debate which will bounce from pollution, to ministers' salaries, to pensions, to jobs for the boys, to the post office and back again? And how, as a consequence, is

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the public supposed to form any opinion except that this place is a hopeless mess?

I have already described the dangers attendant upon Parliament becoming a less effective mechanism of control over the executive, and a less sensitive instrument for transmitting to and impressing upon the executive the needs and aspirations of the people of Canada. The increasing use of the omnibus bill as a means of presenting government legislation is but another in a long series of steps taken by the Prime Minister to make Parliament as irrelevant in fact as it always has been in his fancy. Every measure which this government has taken in the name of Parliamentary reform or government reorganization, including this bill, has had the effect of making Parliament increasingly irrelevant and powerless and of expanding the power of the cabinet, more especially the Prime Minister.

I suppose one could argue two exceptions to this general rule, the first being the government's endorsement of the new committee system, the second being the provision of research assistance to opposition parties. I do not intend to launch into an analysis of each, but in reality they represent the Prime Minister, the illusionist, at his best—or worst. Its the old shell game. Research assistance was given to the opposition parties and now to government backbenchers, but not enough to make a profound difference in the effectiveness of the House, simply enough to make it appear that something had happened. In the case of committees, they were denied the staff and the powers which would have made them truly effective and immediately the government began pointedly to ignore their existence. As an illustration, I need only refer to the fact that a decision was taken by the government on its role in NATO at the same time as a parliamentary committee was sitting to determine its position on that very matter, or to the fact that the government decided to cancel the Prince Edward Island Causeway project before a standing committee of the House examining that question, among others, had had the opportunity to conclude its deliberations. There are a multitude of other examples.

● (4:50 p.m.)

I want to look briefly at some of the other developments which have contributed to the aggrandizement of the cabinet, especially the Prime Minister, at the expense of parliament. I do this at the invitation of the President of the Treasury Board who has indicated to the House that one of the purposes of this bill is to give us an opportunity to discuss the development of the ministry and its future.

One of the first things the Prime Minister did on entering the House was to establish a roster or system of rotation for the appearance of ministers during the question period. This measure was taken by the Prime Minister without any prior consultation with opposition parties, even though a committee to study procedure was at that time being established. The delays and buck-passing made possible by the roster system have down-graded the importance of the question period, made the atmosphere in the House a lot less electric, and given ministers more time to prepare a mass of verbiage with which to