

*Privileges and Elections*

at the age of 18. Certainly, some of us would, but what if the committee should recommend 17 years of age, or 19, or 21? What if the House adopts a report containing such a recommendation, one, in other words, that would be contrary to that placed by the government in the throne speech? Would this constitute non-confidence in the government? Perhaps this is an academic question, but I say it is a fundamental one. The relationship of the executive to the legislative branch always is fundamental in any system of representative and responsible government.

● (4:20 p.m.)

We hear today much discussion about this country moving closer and closer to the presidential system. Papers are being written on the subject by some eminent scholars. There is a good deal of discussion of the question in the media, and there are developments worth reflecting upon in this very important field.

The presidential system as practised in our great neighbouring democracy has much to commend it; but the evolution that we see in this country lacks one essential ingredient, namely the recognition that the legislative arm—in the United States they call it Congress; here, we call it Parliament—must be strong, too. In this country we see a growing strength in the executive and a continuing decline in the strength of the legislative arm, and this is the danger. This is why this particular motion today, focusing as it does on this dangerous development, is worthy of the consideration and reflection of all members of this House.

This tendency is all the more serious in a country like Canada where the executive, unlike that in the United States, is not directly elected, and the legislature or a part of it is the one body that is representative of the sovereign people. So that this diminution is a matter that we ignore at our peril.

The kind of presidential systems seen in certain countries of Latin America and on other continents is not one to be cherished by any lover of democracy or any champion of popular will. Developments in this country are, I fear, far more akin to these than to any emulation of the presidential-congressional system of the United States under which freedom has survived for many generations.

If there is one aspect of the business of Parliament that should be free from partisan bitterness, it is the examination of the organs and institutions of electoral choice. We should approach the machinery of elections in the

[Mr. Macquarrie.]

very best possible atmosphere, and this important committee, above all others, should not start its deliberations under any shadow of inhibition or executive diktat.

In session after session, members from all parts of the House have advanced private member's bills on lowering the voting age. How much more appropriate and decent it would have been to adopt one of these bills. Instead, they were with painful consistency and dogged regularity talked out by government-supporting members.

In the last session a group of these bills were referred to the committee as part of its terms of reference. In this session, in light of these terms of reference, apparently even this courtesy has been denied. These bills rest at this moment, lonely and unattended, on the Order Paper as the committee is projected into its study of the subject matter with which they deal.

The motion before us does not reflect any nice regard for the place and responsibility of the committee and of the House. It does not even show consistency for the actualities of the situation. In the face of a declared statement of government policy, again I ask how meaningful can the committee's study of the voting age really be? One might have thought that the government would find some way to deal with this situation a little more honourably. It might have included this directive in these terms of reference. Or it might have excluded section 14 (a), which deals with the voting age, as it excluded sections 62 and 63. The government might have told the committee not to bother with this section since a decision had already been made from on high, that the committee could fiddle around with other items if they wished. But the government did not do that.

One question above all concerns me, and it is this. I wonder why, after years of lassitude on the matter, there should now be such a rush to support extension of the voting age to 18. Ministers were falling over themselves during the summer to disclose what was going to happen. Private members were indicating that they knew even more than the ministers; they knew this decision had already been made in that inner Sanhedrin of power, the Liberal caucus.

Session after session and year after year members on both sides of the House have made this suggestion and introduced bills to give effect to it. But no support was forthcoming from the government. Is there some