

British North America Act

fall below 45, except at some of those awkward moments around five or six o'clock, or at eight o'clock when we resume.

With an enlarged quorum the whips, whose troubles are many, would be under obligation to pay more attention to the number of members in the house and would be bothered by, I think, an unnecessary obligation to see that the quorum was maintained. When the quorum is left at a low figure there is not much need for that type of attention. If the quorum is set at a high figure a person who wanted to obstruct the business of the house might ask for a count just for that purpose. We all know that members are coming and going all the time, and you might have a count of the house called and find that within the lobbies on either side there were members who could immediately enter the house. You would have obstruction of the business of the house just for the sake of having a count to see where members were. I think there should be little or no occasion ever to count out the House of Commons, and that we should be careful that that should not occur. I believe that keeping the quorum low is an assurance that there will be no counting out of the house.

I did a little research on my own after the fashion of the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre. I wanted to find out if this house had ever been counted out in the past. I may not have found all the occasions but I will draw the attention of the house to the three I discovered. It was counted out on the 29th of June, 1917, at the hour of ten minutes to eleven. In those days the house continued until eleven o'clock. There were 18 members present, they were counted and the house was adjourned at five minutes to eleven. It was not a very serious matter, because they were near closing time anyway.

On the 11th of March, 1919, the house was counted out. It was then fifteen minutes after ten o'clock. There were 15 members present. They were counted, and the house was adjourned at eighteen minutes after ten.

Mr. Rowe: What date was that?

Mr. Churchill: The 11th of March, 1919. In the first instance I gave the house was debating a bill. In the second case they were considering the address in reply to the speech from the throne. The third occasion was on the 10th of June, 1938. The house was in committee of supply, and at eight p.m., just after the supper hour, a sufficient number of members were not present. A count was held. There were only 16. The chairman of the committee called in Mr. Speaker, who then had another count made and discovered

that the number had reached 17. The house was then adjourned at ten minutes after eight. These are the only three occasions I have found on which the house was counted out because a quorum was not present.

I also had occasion to look at the situation in the United Kingdom. My hon. friend mentioned the fact that years ago our quorum was still only 20 when the house was small in numbers. He said the number of members has increased, and that the quorum has not gone up correspondingly. He mentioned the fact that in 1867 the quorum consisted of 11.5 per cent of the members, but I do not think for one minute that when the fathers of confederation were determining the quorum of the House of Commons in 1867 they decided upon a percentage. They just took what had been the practice in the past, simply an arbitrary figure of 20, and let it go at that. I do not think anyone ever worked it out on a percentage basis until possibly the committee of 1925.

The House of Commons of the United Kingdom has been functioning for many years, and they have a larger membership than we have. I think it is 625 at the present time. Their quorum was set at 40 over 300 years ago. Mr. Ivor Jennings, who has written an excellent work entitled "Parliament", states on page 75:

By a usage which dates from 1640, and which may be altered by resolution of the house, there is a quorum of forty members.

The quorum is set at that figure, and although they have an easy method of altering it they have not bothered so to do. I think the reason is the very reason I have already given, that the purpose behind the quorum is simply to see that things get started on time without too much trouble and to guarantee to members who are not present that nothing is being done in the chamber except by at least 20 members. In the United Kingdom the House of Commons, with a membership of 625, is satisfied with a quorum of 40.

The question of the quorum of the house at Westminster was raised about a year ago last December when the house was counted out unexpectedly. It was debating a government measure, the iron and steel bill, and it was discovered that there was not a quorum present. The house was counted out and the sitting adjourned. Following the resumption of business the next day Mr. Attlee twitted the government for permitting itself to be counted out on a matter of government business. There had only been four members of the opposition present, but he quite properly said that it was no particular concern of the opposition to maintain a quorum of the house when the government of the day was trying