

Privilege—Mr. McGrath

Centre have suggested as a course of action which would protect the privileges of the House.

I will come to the question of privilege in summary. We do not object to the taking of polls. We want to know the questions and we want to know the answers, because knowing the question very often tells you what the answer will be. It will certainly help the government in knowing which questions they are going to be putting in future. We have to know those things. The government should allow this House an opportunity to debate the results of public opinion as we feel it ourselves and as we feel we can represent it.

The government of the day should establish a committee, as it has done and, with all flexibility, it should establish a consensus of the House on the position of the Government of Canada and of the Parliament of Canada with respect to constitutional renewal. No party has a monopoly on constitutional renewal, no party has a monopoly on patriotism, and no party has a monopoly on loyalty to its country or to its future. That is something which is shared by all members of the House.

The question of privilege is really quite simple. It is this. Imagine the implications if we do not consider what to do about the advocacy of the government's positions, for the future of opposition parties in any democracy.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Rae: The government can control the media because they are taking taxpayers' dollars and they can advertise right across the country on the basis of positions which they have and on the basis of polling which they have taken. Compare the resources which the Government of Canada, with its control over the purse strings and over government expenditures, with the budget of the NDP, or even of the Conservative party. There is no comparison at all.

We are faced with a new and very hard question: when does parliamentary democracy become a mockery and when do we replace it with a kind of televised autocracy where the illusion of participation is given by the taking of polls. People come to the door and say, "What do you think the government wants to know?", they take a decision and press a button. The other side of it is the reality where you have a government party which has a monopoly on information and is manipulating that information with a cynicism which we have come to expect of that party, and which we have seen in the memos from civil servants to the Prime Minister and all around. That is the question of privilege.

The question of privilege is: is there a qualitative distinction between the advocacy of a particular position prior to approval by Parliament and the advertising of government programs which have been approved by Parliament? That is not a privilege only of the individual member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath). It is a privilege of the House itself, to decide whether Parliament will be able to control the expenditure of government and whether it will be able to express itself freely without the government lobbying against Parliament's position, or whether we will move to a new kind of political system.

That political system is not parliamentary democracy as I recognize it but some kind of electronic autocracy, which may be favoured by those on the opposite side, but I do not think it is favoured by the people of Canada, and certainly it is not favoured by the members of my party.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Speaker: It is becoming harder and harder for me to choose which hon. member I should hear next. I will hear two more on the opposition side and one on the government side, and then I will conclude the debate.

Mr. J. M. Forrestall (Dartmouth-Halifax East): Madam Speaker, my intervention will be very brief. I want to associate myself with the point made very clearly by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) which he directs to you, in the very narrow context in which we hope you will find the question of privilege, the subject matter of the question of privilege being of such magnitude and new design that perhaps it should be considered by a committee. That might very well be a logical way to proceed in this matter.

● (1630)

I gave the Chair notice at three o'clock of the point I wanted to make, that is, to remind Madam Speaker that the Minister of State for Multiculturalism (Mr. Fleming) and other government members, in arriving at a decision and in rationalizing programs like this, should be very, very aware that they do not speak for me.

Hon. John C. Crosbie (St. John's West): In connection with this matter, I gather from listening that there is a lamentable lack of precedents on the issue Madam Speaker now has to decide. The question that must strike one is why there is such a lack of precedents. There is such a lack of precedents because never before in the history of Canada has a government had the arrogance to attempt to do what this government is attempting to do. To bully and pressure members of Parliament in this way has never been conceived before.

There were some people who thought that the administration which preceded the Clark administration tended to show some arrogance toward the last ten years of its life. But what has happened since February 18 puts that right into shade. That is why, when Madam Speaker looks for precedents, you will not find any on this issue. I hope you, Madam Speaker, will take your time before deciding this issue. I suggest perhaps that it should be taken under advisement and not decided today.

It may be that Madam Speaker cannot do anything about this tyranny of the majority. This is tyranny of the majority. It may be under parliamentary rules and customs that Madam Speaker cannot do anything about it. If that is the case, then we will have to depend on the people of Canada when we can go to them to defend us from this tyranny of the majority, which will be four or five long years away. It may be that this kind of technique will be used by the government, and hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent in the next four years.