

Motion for Concurrence in Report

motion suggested that unless this rule is adopted debate could go on endlessly. But the truth is that on any specific item of legislation, if the government feels that the right to debate is being abused or that the public interest is suffering by not having a particular law passed, if the government feels it can justify the use of closure in that instance, it can invoke closure. It does so, accepting the responsibility for it before the people of Canada and relating it to a particular case.

But what is proposed today goes far beyond the present rule of closure. It would permit the government house leader to decide a week or more in advance to apply closure to all stages of all measures on the order paper or before standing committees before any consideration had been given to any of them. He would determine. He would be the dictator. The government majority in the house would give his dictate the stamp of approval, and parliament would be bent to his will.

Some hon. Members: Shame.

Mr. Stanfield: The government house leader or others on his behalf may assure us that he will use this power moderately and responsibly. He can keep his assurances. They are worth nothing in this parliament and less than nothing to any future parliament. The government has more than enough power to act under the present closure rule. If in a given case the government feels the right to debate is being abused and if it feels it can justify cutting it off, why does it want this new power? Why does it want it, except to apply closure in advance to a whole parcel of legislation? The only reason for having this added power is to use it, and use it it would.

• (5:10 p.m.)

Now, why this added power? A majority government does not need this power unless it wants or intends to be authoritarian. This power would be of no use to a minority government because only a government with a majority to ram through the will of the house leader can make any use of this particular rule. The intention is clear, to make closure the routine rather than the exception. The assumption contained in this proposal is that the minority is always irresponsible and always wrong, the majority is always responsible and always right. Pass this proposal, and the volumes that have been written by the Prime Minister over 20 years on the rights of the minority will be categorized as sanctimonious hypocrisy. I say to the Prime Minister through you, sir, that if he insists

[Mr. Stanfield.]

that these changes be passed he will deny and betray what he says he has stood for.

We will be told by the government in the course of this debate that no government would really abuse this power because they would be turned out of office by the voters at a general election. This argument is nonsense. If we follow that line of reasoning, we might as well pack up parliament and all go home. The people could go on electing governments every four years or so, they could defeat governments, change their political complexion and the personalities that compose them, and we would continue to call it a democracy. It would be no democracy at all if in the meantime the government could use parliament as a rubberstamp.

The government is not satisfied with the changes that have been largely accepted by members of the opposition. They are not satisfied with our willingness to be committed by the agreement of house leaders to a given time. They are not satisfied with having a recourse to closure in extreme cases where they are willing to accept the responsibility and think they can justify it to the people. They are not satisfied with any of this. They are determined that parliament will be programmed, and programmed by them, by the government and the government majority. The reference to programming of business recurs three times on one page in the third report of the special committee.

Let me put it in the most direct way possible. No hon. member of this house, least of all the minority in this house, has been elected to parliament so that we can be programmed by the government. You can computerize the Prime Minister if you like. You can make automatons of your cabinet ministers if they are docile enough to allow it. You can put ministerial activities on a flow-chart and program the Prime Minister's political and social life, if that is the way you want it. However, you should take the word back to those industrious gentlemen in the east block that the computer stops here.

What is the context in which this unnecessary power is being demanded? First, it is being demanded within the context of a majority government, a government with a comfortable majority in this house. As I have said, a majority government does not need this power, and wants it so that it can permit itself the excesses that this power allows. Second, the power is demanded within the context of an opposition that has proven itself to be responsible. We cut off, that is, all parties on this side of the house, the throne