

Standing Orders

impossible situation right now to try to operate the committees on the basis on which they were set up, especially for a Government with a large number of Members. I think it is very difficult. There was a system in our committees which was a system I liked. It allowed me the freedom to get on to the committee. The system was that there would be x members and x alternates. I was originally put on one committee but I did not like that committee. The way I got on to other committees was by sitting on the committee until I finally became an alternate member. I sat on that committee for hours, days, months and years and finally became a regular member. It was a means to an end. In such a large group as we have it is difficult to move upward in a committee. I succeeded in that because one of the alternates did not appear as often as I did, then one of the regular members did not appear as regularly as I did or ask questions on the regular basis on which I did. In that way, I, as a hard-working Member of the House, was able to work myself up in the committee. That shows that seniority is not all that counts.

• (1600)

I think that is equitable and fair. I did not push it in these amendments because I have had co-operation from the Opposition Whip with regard to other changes in the rules. I think we can still run the committees to everyone's satisfaction through the changes we made in November.

We eliminated the Parliament Committee and included it with the Committee on Management and Members' Services. We decided to reduce the Committee on Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments because no one attended it. It is not of major interest to Members of the House of Commons. We have previously tried to work out the priorities among the legislative and standing committees and are now trying to refine that. We have tried to ensure that standing committees never sit when the House is in session. Legislative committees only will sit at that time.

There have been some difficulties with Bills which have previously been reviewed by the Finance Committee being referred to legislative committees. An excellent example of a case in which there was co-operation from all sides is that of Bills C-42 and C-56. The Finance Committee had already studied those Bills. It would be ridiculous to refer them to a legislative committee because, as the Whip, I would simply move the people from the Finance Committee to the legislative committee. That would really not mean anything.

I recall being the chairman of a legislative committee on a Bill. The entire Finance Committee was simply moved to the legislative committee. The committees have independent chairmen, but the problem in that case was that the original intent was that no witnesses would appear before the legislative committee. However, in this case the Minister had said that there would be an opportunity to call witnesses when the Bill was in committee, and that is when it went to a legislative committee rather than the standing committee.

The major changes relate to Orders of the Day. We had to find a way to advance government motions. There were so many dilatory motions every day that we were never able to proceed with debate on Bills. I accept that this place should be democratic, but I do not believe that it should be controlled by the Opposition without any input from the Government. The problem is that dilatory motions continually slow down the proceedings of the House and we never have a chance to debate the Bills we want to debate, only the dilatory motions. That is not accomplishing anything in the governing of the nation.

Mr. Lewis: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I would like to indicate to the House that the Government has absolutely no intention of extending the hours today between four and five o'clock. Debate should proceed on this motion until five o'clock with no such indication from any Member on the government side.

Mr. Fennell: Madam Speaker, I thank the Parliamentary Secretary. However, I had a good crowd and was enjoying it and now I will lose my audience. I guess my hon. friend, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Lewis), felt I may have been playing to the audience a bit.

It is important to debate Bills. There is a limit to the amount of time you can discuss a Bill. I recall a ridiculous situation which took place when we were in opposition before the rules were changed. I was told that I had to keep talking for an hour and a half but I had only had a few minutes to prepare my speech. That was silly, but we had to do it because it was our opportunity to get our points across. We have removed the right of speaking for an hour and a half and the maximum time allowed is now 20 minutes, which makes a lot of sense to me. As a matter of fact, I think that ten minutes would probably be adequate to get your points across. In order to speak for a full 20 minutes one must have done thorough research. I have done thorough research on a Bill many times and seen the Bill pass before I had an opportunity to speak on it. That can be a little discouraging.

I think the Opposition is making a big to do about nothing. When Members realize that we have tried to simplify the processes in the House they will understand the Government's strong wish to govern the country. We believe the Opposition is important and we do listen to it. However, as I indicated before, committees provide a better opportunity and more time to really study a Bill. We do not accomplish nearly as much as we could in the House and not nearly as much as is accomplished in committees. I think limiting debate in the House and providing more time for debate in committees would solve some of the frustrations of the Opposition.

When I was in opposition I found committees to be the place where I could express myself and work toward making changes which, little as they were, were important. I recall that there were 49 amendments moved to the National Energy Program. They were not major but some were of great importance to us.