

HOUSE OF COMMONS

MEASURE TO FIX DURATION AT FOUR YEARS

Mr. Ralph Stewart (Cochrane) moved that Bill C-212, respecting the duration of every House of Commons, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

He said: Mr. Speaker, the essence of this bill is to have fixed dates for our general elections. When I first introduced this bill in the last session, it was together with two other bills as a sort of package. The idea was that all of these measures could be debated at one time in our discussions on changes to the constitution. Unfortunately, we have not had an opportunity to go into that matter fully.

This bill is rather related to the others in that it would help to simplify the operation of this House. One of those bills had to do with the designation of a seat on Parliament Hill to be occupied by Mr. Speaker. The second one had to do with the automatic designation of seats for the leaders of the government and opposition. The third had to do with fixed dates for elections.

● (1702)

There is nothing new about this principle; several other members have brought it up in the past. The hon. member for Timiskaming (Mr. Peters) had such a bill on the order paper on a number of occasions so that we might be able to put some order and planning into our work and, more important, so that the people of Canada might know exactly how long a government would be in office and precisely when a new administration would be taking over.

As hon. members are aware, the twenty-ninth parliament was a minority parliament; we did not know from one day to the next whether parliament would continue or not. Everyone at that time was very anxious that something be done about determining when elections would be held. Arguments came from both sides to the effect that the situation would be much more stable if there were fixed election dates, whether there was a minority government or not; the people would make a decision and we would stick by that decision. The way things are now, we are supposed to second guess the people. If the people decide they want to send one party or another here, that is their privilege; we ought not to turn around and say: Unless you give us "X" number of members we shall not be able to carry on as a government or as a properly formed House of Commons. My view is that we should be obliged, as representatives of the people, to go ahead and represent them in the way they have chosen.

Surveys were made at that time. I made some surveys with respect to simplifying the work of the House. One suggestion was that members might work here for three weeks and then be off for one week so that we could do work in our own constituencies. Everyone was ready to accept suggestions of that type, in particular that there should be a fixed term for parliament. Of course, as soon as the majority government came about in 1974 most people forgot about it. In recent

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months, however, I have received a little publicity in connection with this bill and as a result letters have reached me from all parts of the country. I have been on open line shows even in Vancouver—over the telephone from here, of course. People called in and I do not recall any single individual who disagreed with the idea of fixed election dates. They all stated unequivocally it is time we adopted some procedure like that.

On most occasions when we discuss matters of this sort it is said we are imitating the United States or adopting a republican form of government. People like to place labels on these things. I do not believe this would lead to a republican form of government at all. If it happened to suit our purposes and it is best for the people of Canada, there is no reason why we should not go ahead with it.

The bill itself states that the next general election will be on the first Monday of June of next year and subsequent elections would be held every four years thereafter, the new administration taking hold on July 1. But this measure differs from some of the other bills in this area in that it would include a kind of ceremonial sitting of the House of Commons on July 1 at which time the new administration would take over. It would be a ceremonial sitting at which the people would be able to participate. It would take place on Parliament Hill and it would include people from all parts of Canada and from all walks of life, people of various ethnic groups.

As part of the ceremony citizenship certificates could be given out. There are any number of things we could do. We could include some of our religious leaders to show we have not forgotten about the existence of a supreme being. As I say, there are any number of things which could be included in a ceremony of that kind. In this bill I am suggesting that such a ceremony should take place every year at the beginning of the new session. There would be four sessions but, of course, the most important ceremony would be that at the beginning of the new parliament.

It is unfortunate that whenever we want to get something done around here we invariably say we must use a non-partisan approach. In other words, if we want to do anything right let us forget about partisan politics. I agree there is too much partisanship generally. The very fact that people would make that remark about approaching a subject in a non-partisan way shows there is too much partisanship around here. If there were a four-year period during which everyone knew very well there was not going to be an election, perhaps we would get down to work and do business without always taking a politically partisan approach. This, in my view, would be one of the most important things to be gained by holding an election only at fixed dates every four years.

It is also unfortunate that most of the ideas that private members bring forward, such as this one, for example, are discussed only briefly during private members' hour and then forgotten, simply because they are talked out, as it were, and there is no opportunity for them to be discussed more fully in committee. Many members before me have described this as being a very poor approach. Many of the issues brought up during the private members' hour could well be sent to a