

*Government Orders*

most important stage through which the bill is required to pass; for its whole principle is then at issue and is affirmed or denied by a vote of the House”.

We may question this reform plan because the debate and the vote on the principle of a bill are the best way the opposition members have of controlling government bills. The debate and vote on principle allow them to question the very appropriateness of presenting such a bill before it is examined and debated clause by clause.

The proposals in this reform bring a few questions to mind. Will members really have the opportunity to criticize a bill before it is passed? I do not question the government's intentions on this issue, I am simply saying that, if we accept what is proposed, we will still be far from our objective. Maybe we will reach it, but only experience will tell us if such is the case or if we have missed our goal altogether. The possible consequences of these modifications lead me to believe it will be hard for members to debate, in the House, the suitability of government bills.

We will have 180 minutes to determine if it is relevant to send a bill to committee; but then we will be discussing the appropriateness of sending the bill to committee and not the bill itself. Let us not kid ourselves, everyone knows that we can talk about something even if we do not have the right to do so, that we can do indirectly whatever is forbidden directly. Therefore, that 180-minute period will in fact be devoted to discussing the principle of the bill. If we do not agree with the principle, we will question whether or not it should be referred to committee. But we would have to use a round-about way to debate what is most fundamental.

Moreover, since members will have the opportunity, in committee, to get involved in the actual drafting of a bill, clause by clause, they will certainly be more involved in general, but here again, the government will have to exercise a lot of caution. Some members, although opposed to the very principle of a bill, may still try to improve it. They should not be told afterwards: “You proposed an amendment which was adopted, and now you are voting against it”. They still want to be able to vote against a bill, even if they have drafted, asked for the adoption of or voted in favour of an amendment to a given clause, in order to limit the subject matter of a bill they intend to fight. That should be made perfectly clear so that opposition members are not used to rubber stamp a bill they disagree with.

I do think that the government will have a huge responsibility in that matter. Democracy should not be held hostage by cunning manoeuvring. As I said before, only time will tell how good this reform really is. It does have some positive aspects such as the review of estimates by the standing committees. It will allow members to review the estimates of each department and to table reports regarding the government's future expenditures. We

totally support such an initiative; as a matter of fact, we of the Official Opposition, have been demanding a debate in the House for the past three weeks, to review each department's budget, item by item, envelope by envelope. Therefore, you can be sure that we support this committee. Still, it falls short of the fundamental request we have been making since the start of this Parliament.

● (1255)

A second positive point certainly is the idea of pre-budget consultations by the Standing Committee on Finance. This committee will consider and report on proposals regarding the budgetary policy of the government. I think this is an important step, one that should have preceded the tabling of the current budget. I think that, before all those consulting firms that have organized conferences across Canada, the primary stakeholders are the members of this House. We were not consulted, but this change will remedy this shortcoming.

Speaking of shortcomings, I believe that there are a few more. I am referring for instance to pre-screening for order-in-council appointments. On page 92 of their platform, the Liberals accused the Conservatives of making a practice of choosing political friends. Well, there is nothing in here to stop such a practice. As the Minister of Canadian Heritage said, and the appointment of the president of the CBC reflects that reality, the red book is a thing of the past and we must look to the future. We can see that it is indeed a thing of the past, because the proposal made, as I said, on page 92 of the Liberal red book is nowhere to be found in here.

There is also the issue of special debates. It was also raised. The Liberals had raised it at the time they were in the opposition. There should be a procedure to allow special debates to be held in a timely manner. Many people wonder why the members of the House are debating some obscure matter with little connection with current events sometimes, while major events can happen in our society that seem to go unnoticed in this House. The fact of the matter is that special debates would allow the House of Commons to be attuned to reality. Yet there is nothing with regard to that in the proposal before us.

We must see why such a proposal was made, and I refer to my colleague from Kingston and the Islands who said in 1991: “We believe that our country works well with a strong and efficient opposition”. Now can we conclude that this reform will really enable the opposition to be strong and to function effectively? This reform in itself does not necessarily enhance the role of members of Parliament. I repeat, experience will show whether the fundamental principles which I think are endangered by this reform are respected or not. I hope that the government will have the wisdom to assess whether the reform will achieve its objectives or not. If the reform does not have the intended effect,