

What may be different is that they were not formally recognized as staff. There is no question in my mind that the staff in my office, and indeed in the offices of other members of this House, are extremely competent people and would be an asset to the Public Service of Canada.

The question of equality of treatment again is one which is very prominent and prevalent in the minds of Canadians these days, as it has been for quite a while. We in this House are sometimes likened to those living in a fishbowl, subject to scrutiny from all sides and from top to bottom. One must ask how the public would perceive this proposal, and whether it would be seen not as an issue of providing equitable treatment but rather as a form of preferential treatment for a select group.

• (1710)

The issue of equality is an important one. However, I must note that I would be gravely concerned if, in an attempt to provide what one might call equity of treatment, the public were to view this as an attempt to provide preferential treatment under a different guise. The proposal would provide a priority for appointment to the Public Service without competition and in priority to almost every other person in Canada.

There is no question that we, as members of the House of Commons, owe the fact that we are where we are because of those who have served us so well and who continue to service us often times through successive elections and through successive sittings of the House. Indeed, there are some members of the House who have been in such roles for the last 20 to 25 years. As was noted today, there were four members honoured by the fact that they have had 25 consistent years here in the House.

To them, we have an ongoing debt of gratitude. What perplexes me, however, is the concern that, in attempting to provide this group with a provision that may be only a token of their worth, we might unwittingly expose them to unfair criticism for being privy to what some might call a "back door route" to the Public Service.

Private Members' Business

Is the provision of a priority for appointment to the Public Service the proper course, or is it that some changes to the provisions in the House of Commons staff rules might be more appropriate?

In the research that I have been able to do on this topic, I have not been able to determine with any certainty whether in the minds of the members of the House at the time the Public Service Employment Act was enacted, the reason that this priority was not extended to the staff of members of the House was because such staff was not officially recognized at that time.

I would note that when the legislation was enacted, there was an accompanying clause introduced in the legislation stating quite clearly—at least this appeared to be the statement at the time: "no employee shall (a) engage in work for, on behalf of or against a candidate for election as a member of the House of Commons,—or engage in work for, on behalf of or against a political party;".

I do not want to dwell on this point because I understand that this particular section of the Public Service Employment Act is currently under review in the Supreme Court. I only wish to indicate that over the past few years, Public Service unions have put considerable pressure on the government to loosen the restrictions on the political activities of public servants.

Indeed, our government is on record as supporting the view that any restrictions on the political activities of public servants should be no greater than are necessary to maintain a politically neutral Public Service. The challenge to date has been to determine just where that boundary lies.

The section of the Public Service Employment Act enacted in 1967, that the bill before us today proposes to amend, represented a major step forward in opening the way for federal public servants to participate in the political process.

This legislation was based on the recommendations of a joint committee of the House of Commons and the Senate on employer-employee relations in the federal public service. While retaining the restrictions on working for, on behalf of, or against a political party or candidate for election, the legislation specified that an employee did not contravene the prohibition by attending a political meeting or by contributing money to the fund of a political party or of a candidate.