

Government Orders

There are some questions as to the validity of replacing days with hours that will be raised later. First, one might take note of the ill-advised proposals for Wednesday evenings and Friday afternoons.

As mentioned earlier, Wednesday evenings have been kept clear of House sitting for 85 years. This has been a recognition that members of Parliament do have extra-parliamentary duties or family responsibilities that require at least one week night to be kept free. Wednesday has virtually for the entirety of this century been institutionalized as the evening embassies, interest groups, regular visiting groups have planned for years ahead to have various events scheduled for that particular evening.

Now the government proposes to create this unnecessary chaos. No doubt there are bureaucrats perhaps in the Prime Minister's Office or elsewhere or some other place who cannot envisage members of Parliament being required in Ottawa some place other than Parliament Hill probably because they themselves are restricted in their undimensional existences.

The proposal to extend the hours on Fridays is even more of a surprise since the present sitting arrangements for Friday are entirely the product of the Conservative backbenchers who a few years ago proposed sitting at 10 a.m. on Fridays and adjourning at 3 p.m. in order to facilitate members keeping constituency engagements on Friday evenings.

The government claims that it needs these additional hours to replace the legislative time it is losing by sitting eight fewer weeks in a year. One might well marvel at the ignorance of the way the House functions on the part of the bureaucrats in the Privy Council Office. Sausage makers may be judged on the number of bangers per hour but legislators think in terms of days and weeks. This proposal I suggest is a foolish government miscalculation and ought to be dropped.

One must not diminish or dismiss so lightly the application of this principle to the so-called opposition days, which are really government days allotted to the business of supply, to permit the opposition to choose the topic for debate. Part of the government's proposal is that the number of so-called opposition days be reduced from 25 to 20. The government argues that the addition-

al sitting hours compensate for the lost days. In fact, the proposal reduces the number of issues that the opposition may raise before being compelled to vote the government the money it requires and needs.

The business of supply is the essential business for which the Crown summons Parliament and the principle of—and I quote—“grievance before supply” is absolutely central to parliamentary democracy. The opposition day system is the main vehicle for the maintenance of this principle and it is absolutely unacceptable for the government to attempt, in the guise of making Parliament more efficient, to bring about a major erosion of the exercise of this principle by reducing the number of grievances that the opposition may raise by some 20 per cent.

There is an even more insidious move by the government buried in those proposed rule changes; that is the proposal that if the government uses its majority to stop the House from sitting when the rules normally require it to sit, the number of opposition days is further reduced. In other words, if the government used its majority to force an adjournment from the end of March to the middle of June, it could do away with virtually all the supply days. That is at the very time that the Main Estimates, the government's principal spending plan for the year, is before the House.

I ask you, Madam Speaker, is that fair? Is that just?

Mr. Peterson: They don't want democracy to work.

Mr. Dingwall: The government is proposing to give itself a vehicle for preventing the House of Commons from giving any consideration at all to its main spending plan.

This strikes at the very purpose of calling Parliament into session at all.

Earlier this year we proposed to the government a modification of the supply rules whereby the allotment of supply days would be determined, not by the calendar but by the nature of the estimates, the nature of the demand for supply that the government at any given time had before Parliament. We felt that this would give the government some much needed flexibility, while protecting the right of Parliament to examine the estimates and to “grievances before supply”.