

contemplate confiscation in some cases of certain portions of private savings.

Yet the argument would go that MP pension plans are somehow sacrosanct. This is a completely untenable position. It is another example of the House of Commons suggesting that it should protect itself above all else. Just as we see today where the procedure and House affairs committee is suggesting that we should protect the size of the House of Commons from reduction, we should not share in the general downsizing of government here, we are seeing a similar argument with the MP pension plan.

The Prime Minister early in this Parliament promised or said that MPs should be able to opt out of the plan. As the member for Beaver River pointed out, we are now paying 11 per cent of our gross salary which only covers less than 20 per cent of the plan to pay for the extravagant pensions of those who are already receiving it. This is something we as Reformers object to. Of course we would like to see a fair plan but we are prepared to arrange for our own private savings.

• (1030)

The question is: Why is the Prime Minister delaying? I believe it was August 3, 1993 that the present Prime Minister called on Kim Campbell to recall the House of Commons and make changes to the MP pension plan and he wanted it done in one day. He said it could be done in one day. Now 400 days later nothing has been done and nothing in particular has been done on his promise to allow MPs to opt out of the plan.

Why is he so reluctant? The reason is very simple. The Prime Minister knows he made a mistake in suggesting that MPs could opt out of the plan. He knows full well that if any MP in this House opted out of such an obscene and indefensible arrangement the political pressure on other MPs would virtually force every other member of Parliament within one term to drop out of the plan if they were considering seeking re-election. The Prime Minister knows that.

I urge government members not to be so critical and to read the motion. The motion is quite reasonable. In principle it is not unlike what the government itself suggested during the election. I would suggest that government members consider this very carefully. Forget the fact that some of them have big dollar signs in their eyes now and in their dreams. Just remember that the motion is quite reasonable, vote for it and indicate to the Canadian people that all parties are prepared to make a change to this unjustifiable arrangement.

Mr. Ted McWhinney (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have a question for either the hon. member for Beaver River or the hon. member for Calgary West.

Supply

Accept for argument's sake that in juridical terms what we are dealing with is not a constitutional right, because unlike the United States constitution the Canadian Constitution has no contract clause. We are dealing with a constitutional privilege.

Is it the thrust and intent of the motion not merely to cover presently operating privileges as to pensions but those that might be said to be in a private law sense to have already vested, that is to say, contracts already entered into? The argument as presented would seem to suggest that this should apply both retrospectively and prospectively in the full sense. I wonder if that is in fact the intent and purpose of the amendment.

Mr. Harper (Calgary West): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the question.

The member for Vancouver Quadra will understand that today we are not discussing a formal amendment or legislation but merely a motion that we bring the MP pension arrangement into line with private sector standards.

In terms of my own address I was talking specifically about broader Reform Party policy which has suggested that changes to the MP pension plan should apply retrospectively as well as prospectively. Once again I would defend that very clearly on a number of grounds. The most important is that this was not a voluntary transaction and not a transaction with any defensible commercial basis. Any privileges that have been gained through this legislation well above and beyond what could be expected from MPs' own contributions should not be protected in law, not for past members nor for future members.

Mr. Jim Abbott (Kootenay East, Ref.): Madam Speaker, I note my colleague said in his address that over 400 days ago the Prime Minister had said he was going to make a change to the MPs pension plan. By way of comment I draw to the attention of the House that he cancelled a multibillion contract on helicopters just like that. He cancelled the Pearson airport deal which was in the hundreds of millions of dollars just like that.

I wonder if the member has any idea why in the world the Prime Minister would not have done something about the MPs pension plan when it is the number one item on the hit parade. The people in my constituency tell me and other members in my party tell me that when they get to their constituencies it is the number one issue that stands between them and their constituents in spite of the fact that our party is attempting to do something about it.

• (1035)

I find it absolutely amazing that there are only 52 members in this House of Commons who find that to be true. I wonder if that is possible.

Mr. Harper (Calgary West): Madam Speaker, I cannot read the Prime Minister's mind but it is evidently clear that within