

referred to a committee. If he does request that that petition be referred, then the subject matter may be taken up by that committee. That is under Clause 6, Rule 22. In the Senate, a petition may be introduced. No debate is allowed except by unanimous consent. If there is unanimous consent, then debate is allowed on a petition. A Senator cannot be interrupted during his debate to introduce a petition. However, it is only in the House of Representatives that in fact a petition can proceed to a committee of the House. So they have a similar opportunity in the United States to the one which I am encouraging this House to deal with.

• (1650)

In Great Britain there is the opportunity for a Minister to respond. He must respond to a petition. We have neither of those requirements as compulsory actions for the presentation of our petitions. It is left to the will of the Minister to respond, and most often he does not do so. As I said, only twice in our history have petitions been allowed to go to a standing committee for discussion.

Therefore I feel that if we are going to give adequate redress to complaints of the citizens of this nation, we ought to develop a procedure which will allow the petitions to have some meaning. This is the only way which I can see that we can in fact do that.

I would like to sum up my address to the House by reading a brief passage from a writer on parliamentary procedure. He was writing on public petitions. I am sorry, I do not have his name. He said the following:

These rulings have accumulated in the House over the years and are now as firmly entrenched as the standing orders. These rulings and the procedure surrounding the reception of petitions have acted, in recent years in particular, to discourage petitioning. At many times the House has shown itself willing to waive its rules, however strict, to allow the introduction or the passage of a measure it desires, but it has consistently refused to do the same with petitions. Not only is the possible subject-matter limited today, but the forms are strictly observed. The examination by the Clerk of Petitions ensures that many petitions will never be received by the House. Even if they are drafted properly and deal with a proper subject, the petitions cause little stir in the House; the Speaker informs the House that they may be received and they disappear from sight without comment. At best a member may present a petition in person and read the prayer; his fellow members nod agreeably and the petition disappears; there is no debate. The result of these restrictions and this procedure is that petitions are of little use today.

That has been confirmed. I have not seen the numbers for Canada as to what has happened with petitions, but I do have the figures for Great Britain. I know from my ten years in the House that it is only recently when the economy is in trouble and people are disturbed that we find, all of a sudden, a number of petitions coming to us as Members of Parliament, and then to the House of Commons. They have started to increase in numbers. Therefore, the people of this nation are in fact using that procedure, particularly now, much more so than two or three years ago when I noticed that very few petitions were ever presented to the House. This year almost every day petitions are presented to the House of Commons.

It is obvious that citizens of this nation are asking for redress of their grievances through that practice and they are getting nothing in return. I urge, therefore, Hon. Members of the House seriously to consider the subject matter of this Bill.

Petitions to Parliament

We could certainly, in committee, call witnesses from the two countries I mentioned to tell us how their procedures have in fact allowed citizens of their nations to present their grievances to the House. I feel that we as Members of the House of Commons would be doing our country and our constituents a great service in allowing them some response to the petitions which they ask us to deliver to this institution.

Mr. Paul E. McRae (Thunder Bay-Atikokan): Mr. Speaker, I rise to give some support to the Hon. Member for Wetaskiwin (Mr. Schellenberger) in his desire to have petitions recognized more seriously by this House. I have a problem with some of the details of the Bill, but I particularly like the idea that we might have a committee which would be designated to deal with petitions. I feel the subject, though, is a broader one and I would like to set aside the petition idea and speak about how we extend democracy, which is what the Hon. Member is attempting to do.

We have lived for a long time, and probably quite successfully until the last perhaps ten or 12 or 15 years, with representative democracy, as when you elect a Member of Parliament and one way or another he belongs to a political Party and he then functions through that Party, either as part of the Government or as part of the Opposition. One assumes that every four or five years, when he comes up for re-election, people will say, "Well, you have done a good job, you listened to me, and you got something done", or they reject him; one or the other. It seems to me, however, that in a society where the average person today has 11 or 12 years of successful schooling, and a large portion of our population have university degrees, when things become very complex it is not good enough to pass judgment on a Member of Parliament every four or five years and say, "Well, you have done a good job", and so on. I feel that there must be other ways in which people can make their views known to the country and to this Parliament so that action can be taken.

Very often people will say, "Well, I felt very strongly about that issue. Government did the wrong thing. On the other hand, generally speaking, I am fairly satisfied", but the issue is still there and it is a burning one. Capital punishment was mentioned as one of those issues which bothers a lot of people. I do not share, perhaps, the same view as a lot of Hon. Members on this subject, but I can understand the fact that it does bother people and that for some reason or other they do not feel they are being heard. It seems to me that democracy does not work at all, basically, if more and more people get the feeling that they are not being heard, that for some reason or other the Government of the day is doing the opposite to what they think should be done. It is very difficult for people to understand that there are other people who feel the very opposite to them, that they want something very opposite, and that the Government must compromise somewhere along the line. I feel that one of the answers has to be that people must get a better chance to be heard. But we must also hear the other side.