

Public Bills

Mr. Whelan: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I point out to the hon. member that the only person now in the press gallery is reading a paper.

Mr. Deachman: I suppose they sometimes have to read them if they are going to write for them.

The private members' hour is not all futility. Many propositions in the form of bills have been debated in the private members' hour and, although they have been talked out session after session, they have gradually molded opinion in this chamber and played a role in molding opinion in the country.

When I first came to the House of Commons in 1963, I think it would have been impossible to have a divorce bill passed. At that time, the divorce was the basis for various private members' public bills and motions, and they were debated in this chamber. At that time the private members' hour was a public sounding board. It was one way of hearing a topic debated and of testing public opinion. From time to time, these debates provoked newspaper articles, comments and editorials. They gave light to a proposition again and again as this subject was debated in this chamber. The private members' hour was as instrumental as any other device in the molding of public opinion which eventually led to the passage of reform divorce legislation in Canada. It served a very useful purpose in that instance.

Although technically it did not take place within the private members' hour, it was a private member's bill which was used to introduce the subject of reform of capital punishment in order that members of the House of Commons on both sides might have an opportunity to have a free vote on that subject. It was a private member's public bill, introduced by an individual member during the private members' hour, which changed the name of Trans-Canada Air Lines to Air Canada.

When the Canada Elections Act was massively overhauled last session, the subject matter of a considerable number of private members' public bills dealing with various amendments to the Canada Elections Act were referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. One bill for which I was responsible was referred to that committee. The bills were not referred to the committee, only the subject matter.

By this device a member was able to appear before the committee to debate a particular point of change that he wanted brought about in the Canada Elections Act. I was interested in students who had been disenfranchised in the 1965 election due to a peculiarity in the act. A change was made and this will not happen again to students. This resulted directly from a private member's public bill.

Despite some of the frustrations we may see in this hour, it is not entirely futile. It serves a good purpose. It would indeed be a worthy improvement to our rules if this hour could be made more effective. Perhaps the vast number of private members' public bills could be reduced to a meaningful number which could receive more debate and progress from second reading to third

[Mr. Deachman.]

reading in the manner described by the hon. member for Peace River.

The hon. member referred to the number of bills passed in the United Kingdom parliament. I understand that these bills tend to be non-contentious. The government allocates ten days in the course of a year for debate on private members' public bills. It is apparent that a subject that is non-contentious in nature and which, for example, amends a piece of government legislation in a manner that in the eyes of the government is desirable, stands a very good chance of moving through during the private members' period. In fact, by letting such debate take place the government is extending its own time; it is using the private members' period to carry a bill that otherwise it might have desired to place on its list of government orders. So in reality one wonders how many of the bills that go through the British House are really bills that are initiated by a private member to explore new areas of legislation, or are simply a device to permit a private member to carry through in private members' hour a bill that might otherwise have to be handled under government orders and in the government's own time.

● (5:30 p.m.)

I think we should look carefully at the very great value there is to be had from exploring, in private members' hour, new ideas—new ideas in social legislation, new ideas that need testing in the House before they become law. Of particular interest, of course, is the current concern over the subject of amending the law of abortion. This is a sensitive area in the mind of the public, for many reasons, and is one well worth exploring in private members' hour. The idea of a guaranteed annual income is another subject of considerable sensitivity, one that needs exploration in debate by private members. One can think of many more subjects worthy of debate and of broad consideration by private members in this hour.

It is therefore worth while this afternoon to consider the motion of the hon. member for Peace River, which moves in the direction of suggesting that we should find better ways of employing the time used in this chamber to carry on debate in our own way without the guidance of a motion by the government. I would welcome any suitable reference for sending on to the Committee on Procedure and Organization leading to a general consideration of the way to handle this period more effectively. As the Parliamentary Secretary mentioned a moment ago, I think the motion now before the House may be on the narrow side and that what we should look for is a general reference to enable us to discuss in broader terms the rules of the House and our evolving procedure in a way that can make private members' hour more meaningful.

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I should like to commend the hon. member for Vancouver-Quadra (Mr. Deachman) on his catalogue of achievements that have resulted from the use of private members' hour by the members of this House. I think he