

*Government Orders*

That was the spirit which prevailed in 1985. Today, in 1991, some six years later, the government is in its second mandate. It has reached historic lows in the public esteem. I get the distinct impression from the Conservative government's proposals that its principal concern today is not to enhance Parliament, not to enhance the role of the private member of Parliament, but to diminish Parliament, to reduce the role of Parliament in our system of government. The Conservative government's proposal would reduce by 40 the number of sitting days in a year, from 175 to 135. This would reduce the number of Question Periods by 40 during the year. The number of opposition days, the days on which the opposition can choose the subject of debate in this House, would be reduced by five. The budget debate and the throne speech debate would be reduced by two days.

As I see it, these changes will strike at the very foundations of parliamentary democracy. I would like to explain what I mean. From an early age most Canadians learn that we live in a parliamentary democracy modelled after the British system. The distinguishing feature of a parliamentary democracy is that government is accountable to Parliament. One of the principal means by which this is done is through Question Period. It is the occasion *par excellence* for members of the opposition to question the government about its policies and administration. It is through Question Period that an opposition can uncover weaknesses in government policy, or contradictions between cabinet ministers, and where cabinet ministers must respond for their administration of their departments.

We can all remember occasions where governments have been defeated after having their failings exposed during Question Period. That is how important Question Period is to our system.

What often makes Question Period so effective is its unforgiving nature. Day after day the Prime Minister and the members of the cabinet are required to be in the House of Commons and answer questions. When a government is on the ropes, when a minister is under attack, there is no avoiding Question Period.

Yet the Conservative proposal to change the rules of this House will do precisely that. It will allow the government to avoid Question Period by providing for

one week off in every four. It is not difficult to imagine circumstances where this week off will allow a government to regroup or will allow a minister to regain his or her composure, to better prepare his or her responses, if the government and if the minister have been coming under heavy fire. It will allow the government or a minister to save his or her skin. That is what having one week off in every four will do.

I can remember in my few years in this House a number of occasions, whether one wants to refer to some of the unfortunate episodes where cabinet ministers of this Conservative government were forced to resign; or to episodes prior to the 1984 election where the Minister of National Revenue in our government, the Liberal government, came under fire for certain practices of Revenue Canada at that time. Cabinet ministers would have loved to have been able to get out of this House and to get away from the lights and the questioning during Question Period. That is exactly what these rule changes will allow a minister to do.

I do not think it is overstating the effect of this change to say that the Conservatives will be undermining one of the principal foundations of parliamentary democracy, namely the accountability of government to Parliament.

• (1520)

The Conservatives also propose to reduce the number of days on which the opposition can choose the subject of debate.

[Translation]

To explain the importance of so-called opposition days, I would like to go over some features of our parliamentary system.

In a parliamentary system, it is the government's responsibility to present a legislative agenda. This distinguishes our system from the American one, where bills are sponsored by members of Congress themselves.

Those who follow the sittings of this House on television often see the words "Government Orders" followed by the name of the bill in question at the bottom of the screen. That means that the House is debating a government bill. That is the general rule. The government determines what is debated by this House. Only exceptionally does the opposition set the agenda for the House.