

Abolition of the Senate

● (2120)

In fact, today the House of Lords enjoys more of the suspensive veto powers that we have been proposing in this House for many years. We proposed it in the Thirtieth Parliament with Bill C-60. We thought it would be wise to limit the absolute power of the Senate and to institute a six-month veto, as well as change the method of appointment of senators.

There is a little bit of mischief going about in the country, perpetrated by the Premier of Saskatchewan, to the effect that what the government has done with the constitutional resolution, in deleting Section 44, somehow enhances the power of the Senate and encumbers Canadians with some anti-democratic demagogue. That just is not the case because what the government has done is to maintain the status quo.

My friend the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre may deplore that. At least he is a man principled enough to stand in this House and say that is the truth. I admire him for that because in a sense he is challenging the assertion made by the Premier of Saskatchewan who is a member of his own party.

The one aspect of Senate reform that I should like to deal with briefly is the fact that senators themselves have advocated reform. When I sat on the special joint committee on the Constitution that studied Bill C-60 in the Thirtieth Parliament I did not see an obstructionist Senate that wanted to preserve its absolute veto for all time. Indeed, I found a group of eminently respected individuals who cared about this country and felt that perhaps their absolute powers should be curtailed to within a general scheme of parliamentary reform.

Incidentally, they disagreed with the procedure I described last Thursday when we debated the procedural aspects of the admissibility of debating this bill tonight. They disagreed that the House of Commons had the right to initiate a bill to amend an appointment to the Senate and, of course, the Supreme Court agreed with their assertion and struck that down.

At the time, the senators agreed that there should be significant reform of the upper chamber. I find it rather ironic that the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre, coming as he does from the great CCF populace stock of western Canada and having been in this House since the early forties, should take the position that he does, given the fact that one of the great historians of the CCF and the NDP, Mr. Frank Scott, has matured in his views, as I believe I have in my views. He started, like the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre, many years ago from the position that the Senate should be abolished. In 1970 when another committee was studying the constitution, he said:

There have been about sixty new constitutions written since the end of World War II and in a great many of them there is a second Chamber . . . it is not an idea which is fading away gradually and I would think that there could be now some legitimate place for a Senate that had some regional representation.

That was the genius of Bill C-60 which, unfortunately, has not been fully appreciated by the public. In order to give the regions a better balance, a better impact upon national policies, the government proposed that the Senate would be

appointed according to proportionate representation. Half the Senate appointments would be made by the federal parties represented in the House of Commons—not by the incumbent prime minister as is the case at present but by the leader of the opposition or the Leader of the NDP if they were ever to divest themselves of their emotional, philosophical hatred for the Senate and agree to work with a reformed senate. The other half of the appointments would have to be made by parties in the provincial legislatures; not the premiers of the provinces but the parties themselves, the leaders of the opposition; the Liberal, the New Democratic Party, Socred and all oppositions, perhaps even the Parti Québécois. It would be based on the strength those parties had in the legislatures.

I believe that was the real genius of Bill C-60. It got around the very dicey problem of proportionate representation in the House of Commons, a proposition which may be resurrected. The government is fully committed to electoral reform, as was stated in the Speech from the Throne last year. I hope all members will contribute to that debate.

I should point out that when we talk about electoral reform we are not just talking about proportionate representation in this House. Proportionate representation can be achieved in the upper house.

Mr. Knowles: Are you still committed to Senate reform?

Mr. Collenette: Despite the abhorrence of my friend, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre, I think the Senate has historically discharged its responsibilities with great dignity and wisdom. The Senate, which has the right to reject any bill whatsoever as often as it sees fit, has very rarely used this power. In fact, I believe it has not declined to pass a bill unless it has been endorsed in a general election. This was done with a naval bill in 1915. If I have my facts right, the Senate pronounced upon that bill.

There is great arbitrary power in the Senate but it is used sparingly. I would say that we are doing senators an injustice if we rile against the privilege which they have had for years but which should be changed. We all recognize that it should be changed but for other reasons, not the rhetorical, philosophical rantings and ravings of members of the NDP who approach this subject from an emotional rather than rational point of view.

Today in Canada we have need of another chamber that can review legislation at a more leisurely pace. Every day of the week we hear members speak of the pressures that we in this chamber are under to deal with the Constitution, the energy program and economic issues. Members of Parliament come before the members' services committee saying they are overburdened and that they need more staff. That may be the case. I am sure there is an element of truth in it but I think there is a need for another body that can be more reflective of the regions. I do not mean a body appointed solely by provincial governments. I do not want any bundesrat in this country. That was the proposal made by the official opposition and I remember the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands (Miss MacDonald) speaking at great length and with vigour