

Privileges and Elections

some idea of the immensity of the work involved and the number of sittings required for a careful study to be made of this important matter.

Though I welcome the motion before us as a green light for action toward an updating of our electoral machinery, I cannot say "aye, aye" and figuratively salute the motion as it goes through. Things have happened in recent weeks and months which must be considered very carefully as the House moves toward action by one of its committees in connection with this serious matter. For this motion, and the circumstances preceding it, reveal the stark inadequacy of the committee system and the extent to which the denigration of standing committees has been fostered and furthered by the government. More than once hon. members have risen to protest about the contemptuous disregard which the government has accorded to the considered views of the committees of this House.

Hon. members may recall the lack of respect accorded the External Affairs and National Defence Committee's recommendation on this country's defence role in NATO and Europe generally. Consider the affront which the executive handed the committee on Transport and Communications! That group made a serious on-the-spot study of transportation problems in the Atlantic region. They heard many well-informed and concerned groups and citizens. Some of them were from the Province of Prince Edward Island and therefore they were particularly well-informed, possibly because they faced particularly acute problems. Among the major transportation projects studied was the Northumberland causeway, but the committee did not even have time to return to Ottawa to prepare its report before the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) announced the repudiation of the government's commitment to build that much needed and much promised crossing. To ignore is bad enough. In this instance, the government has pre-empted the committee's area of study and possible recommendations.

In the weeks just prior to the opening of this session, and while the committee was studying the Elections Act under reference from the first session, the Prime Minister was quoted as declaring that the government was sympathetic to the idea of lowering the voting age in federal elections.

The Minister without Portfolio, the hon. member for Port Arthur (Mr. Andras) was reported as making a similar intimation. Later on the Liberal-Labour member from

Kenora-Rainy River (Mr. Reid), who apparently attends the Liberal caucus rather than the Liberal-Labour one, went a little further and gave an interesting blessing to the Prime Minister and the minister, of which latter hon. gentleman's utterance he said: "It's a good thing he made that announcement. It has already been decided."

In the Speech from the Throne, among all the forecasts of white papers, studies and reports, appeared this item, indicating that on one matter at least, the government had made up its mind:

The government believes that the time has come to extend the franchise in federal elections and it will therefore recommend to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections of the House of Commons that the voting age be lowered to eighteen.

Hon. members will note the phrase "the government will recommend". Now, when the present Act was passed, following the Speech from the Throne of 1959, the government of that day adopted a less domineering attitude. I quote from the Speech of 1959:

It will be proposed that the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections review the Elections Act in preparation for subsequent legislation.

The committee was not told, then, that the government would recommend what it ought to do. Mr. Speaker, if there is to be any value attached to the committee system we must be clear about its functions.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Macquarrie: A committee is an emanation of this House and not a creature of the executive. It is for a committee, within its terms of reference, to recommend, and it is up to the House to adopt or reject committee reports and recommendations. Unless this part of the exercise is made meaningful we talk in vain about revitalizing the committee system of this parliament. Here, we have a case in which the government has clearly reached down into the area of the committee's reference and has declared its policy before the committee goes to work. In these circumstances, how realistic can the committee be as it faces its deliberations on the question of the voting age and the extension of the franchise? What importance could be attached to its studies following, as they would, a declaration of government policy in that very field?

I am confident I could predict with accuracy that the committee and the House are in favour of the franchise at the age of 18, and that the committee would probably recommend that candidates, too, should be eligible