

British North America Act

figure 150 that still leaves 115 other members available for attendance here; and to suggest that as a reason why the quorum could not be 30 is, I believe, evading the issue.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, in presenting this bill to the house I strongly urge hon. members to support it. The only criticism, it seems to me, that could be levelled at the bill is that it does not propose a higher figure. If anyone wants to do that I have no objection, but it does seem to me that this at least is a step we should take. Although this bill has been before the house on previous occasions it has not yet received the support of the house, but I present it once again today in the hope that the requirement it contains will meet with the approval of the members of this house.

Mr. Gordon Churchill (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, I am labouring under a disadvantage in entering this debate at this moment. It is always somewhat of a surprise to find out which particular private member's bill is going to be presented; and in addition to that, of course, we have only today resumed our session. My other handicap is that I wish to point out some deficiencies, if I may use that term, in the hon. member's remarks, and I know I am getting tangled up with a person who has already established a reputation for knowledge of the rules of procedure of this house. However, I am going to attempt the task.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) happens to be a resident of the riding which I represent, and every resident of a member's riding is a potential supporter. Nevertheless, I am going to risk the loss of his support in the next election. A year ago when a similar bill was brought before the house I was unfortunately out of the chamber but still in the building, and I missed the debate by about a minute and a half. I made sure I would be present on this occasion.

Mr. Argue: If the quorum had been 30 then you might have been here.

Mr. Churchill: Let me say in advance that I am not much concerned with the proposal for amending the British North America Act. That can be done at any time. I do not think we need any further demonstrations that we are masters of our own destiny. That aspect seems to loom rather large in the opinion of the sponsor of the bill, but I do not think it is of such great importance. I realize, though, that he would like to have the privilege of introducing a bill which would amend the British North America Act and establish a precedent.

[Mr. Knowles.]

The hon. member seems to be concerned with the attendance in the chamber and I propose dealing with that, but before doing so I would like to consider just what is meant by a quorum, and I think the debate may be narrowed down somewhat if we examine a definition. Lest there be some doubt about it, a quorum, according to the Oxford dictionary, means a fixed number of members that must be present to make the proceedings of an assembly or of a society or board valid, and the meaning of the word "valid" given by the same dictionary is "executed with proper formality".

The purpose of a quorum, therefore, is merely to ensure that no business shall be conducted unless there is a certain number of members present. It also serves the purpose of permitting the house to commence its business without any great delay, for it is obvious that when the quorum consists of only 20 the Speaker will be able to call the house to order within a few minutes of the assembly bell. It also means that if there is a falling off in the attendance in the chamber during the transaction of business and there is no quorum in the house, then the house will come to a standstill if someone draws attention to the lack of a quorum and an adjournment will take place, or at least a procedure will be followed to ensure that before the house resumes its business there shall be a quorum present.

But the purpose of a quorum, briefly, is to make certain that any business done in the house shall be conducted according to the rules and shall be valid, and it precludes the conduct of business in the house by perhaps two or three or even a half dozen members. On the other hand, it does not insist that the entire membership shall be present. In any organization or society you have to determine at the outset how many shall be necessary to constitute a valid conduct of business. You either say that everybody must be there, or half the members must be there, or you decide on a certain proportion; and over the years it has been customary in all types of organization to set a rather low figure for a quorum simply to ensure that business will not be conducted without a sufficient number of people present to ensure that everything will be in order. It is not set at a very low figure, nor is it set very high, in order to introduce the element of compulsory attendance which my hon. friend has mentioned.

It is obvious that if a quorum is set at higher than the present figure the house might on occasions be counted out because of lack of attendance, although on many occasions last year I counted the members in this house and my observation was that it was a rare thing for the attendance in this chamber to