

Government Orders

again the issue of the reduction in the number of sitting days proposed in the new Standing Orders.

I would like to make a comment on the matter of sitting days as they relate to the House of Commons.

The Parliament of Canada Act makes it very clear that there is an obligation on every member of Parliament to attend each and every day that the House of Commons sits. In fact, there is a financial penalty for missing a sitting day, even though if it is on public business and so on there is an exemption.

That exemption is resorted to universally by members of Parliament. In fact, I do not think there have been any reductions in sessional indemnities by way of penalty for not being in attendance in the House of Commons.

This is something the public should know. Every member of the House of Commons is required to be in his or her seat when the House of Commons is in session. We know that that is simply not the case. We do not attend every time that the House of Commons is in session.

We do pursue other interests, be they constituency or party interests or other forms of public interest. The point is that we should take a more realistic approach to sitting days. We should recognize that members of Parliament, members of the House of Commons, are required to do things other than be present in Ottawa at their seat in the House of Commons.

They are required to attend at various functions around the country and in that way serve the parliamentary, public and constituency interests. I do not see anything wrong at all, morally or otherwise, with being realistic about the number of days in which the House of Commons should sit because it is not necessary in the public interest to have the House of Commons open 365 days a year.

If that was the case, why would members not be arguing for a 12 month session of the House of Commons, a five day week and for them to be present at all times except through statutory holidays the same way that government offices are open? If that was in the public interest and if the public had an interest in Parliament being open on all those days, why would members of the opposition not be seeking that as a resolution of the problem?

Why would they be objecting for a reduction from 175 days to 135 days? Why would they not be looking for an increase? Why would they not have the House of Commons open every day that government offices are open so that people could come, watch the proceedings in the House of Commons and see the government in action?

We all recognize that there has to be some kind of sensible limitation on the days in which Parliament sits. The only question is: Is the limitation to benefit members of Parliament, or to benefit the Canadian public?

I say very clearly that the Canadian public benefits from a reduction in the sitting days. I would like members to address that point. Do they really think the public really benefits from keeping the House of Commons open as long as possible? Does the public benefit in other ways?

Let me just briefly mention that point because I think the public benefits if they have an opportunity to see their members of Parliament in their constituencies at functions to that they can address their concerns directly to their member. I do not know why members want to hide themselves in Ottawa and turn aside the opportunity to go back to their constituencies one week in every four when everybody knows where we are.

They know that events and appointments can be scheduled to accommodate that. I ask this of the member from Saskatoon: Is that his idea? He does not want his constituents to know that he is available once a week in his constituency office? Does he want to take advantage of the Parliament of Canada Act and say: "I have to be in Ottawa. Parliament is open. You cannot see me."

I think if we are going to be fair with our constituents, we would set a situation where people know where we are. They would know when we are going to be in our constituencies and when we are going to be in Ottawa pursuing the national interest.

Mr. Axworthy (Saskatoon—Clark's Crossing): Mr. Speaker, in terms of the theme of the member's comments, we clearly have a good deal of agreement. What we both seem to be saying, what I am saying and what I took him to say, is that we need to ensure that the rules which apply to the operation of Parliament facilitate the