

*The Address—Mr. Rowland*

mons-Senate committee and as inscribed in my bill is necessary for a number of reasons beyond those associated with a minority parliament. At present, under section 50 of the British North America Act the Commons can sit for a maximum of five years after an election unless its term is extended by a vote of two-thirds of the members; but it can be dissolved by the Governor General, who acts on the advice of the Prime Minister, at any time within the five-year term.

In practice, parliaments are usually dissolved after three and a half to four years in order to offset charges of government arrogance, to avoid the appearance of government clutching too tightly to the reins of power and to permit the government room to manoeuvre and plan legislation so as to present itself to the electorate in the most favourable manner. Thus, at any time after the third year a parliament gets election fever, productivity drops off because members must begin electioneering, the game of guessing "will it be called or won't it" saps energies and diverts attention from legislation. Obviously, a set term would not completely eliminate such practices but it would at least ameliorate the situation.

The second reason apart from a minority situation for advocating a set, four-year term is that it would diminish slightly the power the Prime Minister wields over individual Members of Parliament, especially those in his own party, by taking away from him the ability to decide, on his own, when an election shall be called. The threat of an election can often whip into line rebelling members of a government caucus. Even the exceptions to the set term which my proposal would admit would ensure that the power to decide upon an election date rested with the whole House and not only on the Prime Minister.

The third reason for advocating a set term is that it would give individual Members of Parliament, especially government backbenchers, a greater say in policy formation. If there were a set term, the defeat of a piece of government legislation would not necessarily result in the defeat of the government, as custom would seem to dictate at the present, although that statement must be qualified in particular instances. Thus, a government backbencher would no longer necessarily be confronted with the choice of either voting for a piece of legislation with which he disagrees or having the government, which he probably supports on 90 per cent of its legislation, fall. In short, there would be more free votes. In this kind of situation the government would have to pay much greater attention to the views of its caucus and ensure that those views were reflected in its legislation if it were to be assured of passage.

• (2010)

Opposition influence would also increase because, if their arguments for change in legislation were to convince a number of government backbenchers, the legislation would again be in jeopardy. Thus, the government would have to pay some attention to opposition arguments, and the opposition, with a real chance to influence the course of events, would have to take greater pains to make their arguments responsible and convincing. Debate in the House would become more meaningful and less of a ritual.

[Mr. Rowland.]

The fourth reason for advocating a set-term parliament is very closely related to the third; the fact that there would be more free votes, and debates in the House would become more meaningful. Such a situation would mean that a debate was once again a drama. The outcome would no longer always be known in advance. Debate would once again be genuinely worthy of the attention of the news media. News media coverage would serve to focus public attention upon developments in the House. Just why this change is so important to the democratic process is somewhat difficult to explain, but let me take a stab at it.

Parliament serves the purpose of focusing public attention upon matters of concern and of defining and delineating the considerations and the options involved. In so doing, parliament assists the public in coming to intelligent conclusions about the actions of government and helps individual members of the public to determine their own positions on questions of import. The better the media coverage, the more effective is this wholly desirable process. But beyond that, improved media coverage of improved parliamentary debate would mean a more rapid and a more effective focusing of public attention upon an issue, with the consequence that public opinion would more readily affect government actions.

Votes in the House are no longer the important control on the actions of the executive; rather, appeals by the opposition to the electorate are the important control. Even with a set-term parliament, this would remain the case. The only real sanction, the only real control on government action now is the prospect of defeat in the next election. With a majority government and the well established pattern of voting solidly by party—a pattern which a set-term parliament would soften but not end—votes are virtually meaningless and are useless as a means of effecting parliamentary control. Thus, what is important in the functioning of parliament is the quality of the discussion conducted. What is important in the functioning of parliament is that discussion be focused. What is important in the functioning of parliament is that its discussions be heard by the public, and news media attention would ensure that they were.

The constitution committee's proposal for a set-term parliament would permit the term to be shortened under certain conditions. Exceptions are required for two major reasons. The first is that public opinion, especially in this age of instant electronic communication, is highly subject to change. Thus, it is entirely conceivable that a parliament might not at all accurately reflect public opinion after it had been elected for a period of time but before its four-year term had expired. Therefore, any realistic proposal must permit the effective acknowledgement of such changes through an earlier election. It is for this reason that I suggest an election could be held before the expiry of four years if the government were defeated on a motion of want of confidence, or if the House voted to dissolve and have an election called.

The second major reason for permitting an early termination of parliament under certain conditions is the desire to avoid doing undue violence to one of the parliamentary system of government's greatest strengths—its ability to allow the public to easily assign responsibility for govern-