

*Government Orders*

produced for any given committee meeting. The opposition parties whose members remain as eager as ever to participate in committees resisted this unfair reduction in opportunities for committee membership.

The result was that the September report of the Striking Committee was never concurred. The functioning of the committee system has been impaired since that time.

The government proposal for the committee system leans heavily to the government side. In order to rationalize the staffing and meeting of committees, committees are placed in five envelopes containing the number of specialized standing committees and two legislative committees. Each envelope of committees will have certain dedicated rooms and priorities will be clearly established, so we are told.

Legislation will go either to a standing or legislative committee after second reading, depending on the workload and the issues before the various committees. In discussions over the winter the House leaders and whips have agreed on the size of the committees and taken together with the envelope system, it is hoped that the differing point of view will be reconciled. I suggest that only time will tell whether it can be reconciled.

There are a number of general considerations, however, that the proposals for committees bring to the forefront.

First, there is the question of minority reports. The government proposes to place in the rules the right to amend minority reports and to comment on them when the report is presented to the House.

Second, the question of broadcasting committees. The proposed new rules for the first time mention this possibility but do so in such a way that the possibility of such broadcasting may actually be reduced. A government like the present one which is so desperate in the polls may actually use these rules to retard the progress in this particular regard.

Third, the question arises as to how the proposed new Standing Committee on House Management can deal effectively with its heavy burden. This committee is to function as the Striking Committee, the Management and Members Services Committee, and the Privileges and Elections Committee. It is to be a comparatively

small committee and it is to accept the burden of staffing other committees, bird-dogging the administration of the House of Commons, operating the complex system of Private Members' Business, considering ongoing questions of procedure and electoral reform, and dealing with any matter of privilege or contempt that may come along.

This is an awesome burden for any committee, especially one that is going to be rather small. It is likely to be dominated by very senior members and there is a serious danger—and I do not wish to imply the motives of anyone because that would be totally inappropriate—that it will tend to operate unduly in closed and even secretive ways. I am talking about in-camera sessions.

The potential for making the House of Commons look as if it is an Old Boys Club is a real one with this kind of proposal, and consideration will have to be given to a less exclusive approach to dealing with the matters proposed for this particular committee.

If not, the charge will be made and the perception I suggest could become reality within a very short period of time.

Finally, there is the question of the witnesses that may be heard by committees on bills.

The proposed new rule refers to these committees being permitted to hear only, and I quote: "technical witnesses". The government seems to think that only government departments and agencies can provide witnesses with sufficient technical knowledge to assist committees in the legislative process.

That means if a bill is referred to a legislative committee, members would only have the right to summon before it individuals within the bureaucracy or the department to give a specific explanation of how the law or the statute is read, hence classifying that individual as a technical witness.

I suggest that is very unfair. A lot of the time and on a lot of occasions, members of Parliament need the assistance of those groups and individuals who are the victims or the beneficiaries of the legislation to explain how it will actually work. It is a different perspective and it is a different view, but on many occasions they are very helpful.