

House of Commons Act

[English]

HOUSE OF COMMONS ACT**INCREASE IN NUMBER OF INTERNAL ECONOMY COMMISSIONERS**

The House resumed from Friday, November 6, 1981, consideration of the motion of Mr. Lambert that Bill C-273, an Act to amend the House of Commons Act, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

Mr. D. M. Collette (York East): Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak for a few minutes on Bill C-273. I am grateful to the Hon. Member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) for bringing the matter to the attention of the House. I understand that this is the second time around on second reading debate of this Bill in this session. I should advise the Hon. Member for Edmonton West that, as a member of the Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedure, I have been active with my other colleagues on that Committee in debating this very question. We have certainly benefited from the speeches of the Hon. Member earlier in second reading and from those of other Hon. Members who contributed to the debate.

In saying that I welcome the matter coming before the House, I believe the solution proposed by the Hon. Member for Edmonton West is not the desired one. I hope he will listen in this debate to suggestions whereby we can improve upon his original concept.

Essentially the Hon. Member argues in Bill C-273 that:

The Governor in Council shall appoint five Members of the House of Commons, who, with the Speaker of the House of Commons, shall be commissioners for the purposes of this Section and Section 17 and 18.

The simple purpose of this Bill is, of course, to increase the number of Internal Economy Commissioners from the present five to six. The explanatory notes in part read:

It allows for the commissioners to be chosen from the House at large rather than solely from the ranks of Privy Councillors.

There is one particular point on which I think the Hon. Member is correct. The administration of the affairs of the House or the final responsibility for the running of the House should not be dominated by the executive branch of Government. It should be remembered that our present practice originates from the earlier British practice. I believe it was an Act some time in 1812 or thereabouts which called for the same kind of administrative body in the United Kingdom House of Commons, whereby members of the executive would be responsible for the day to day administration of the affairs of the House. I draw the Hon. Member's attention to the fact that in 1978 the British House of Commons passed what I think was called the House of Commons Commission Act which updated that procedure.

Rather than being content with solely adding one additional member to the present Internal Economy Commissioners, we should perhaps take a look at the British practice and see how it has worked. The Hon. Member for Winnipeg-Birds Hill (Mr. Blaikie), who is deep in discussion at the moment, has some personal knowledge of this, having travelled to London.

The Hon. Member for Capilano (Mr. Huntington) was there with us in January. Perhaps they would like to contribute to the debate to let those Members of the House who were not in Great Britain know how the present situation is in Westminster and how the administration of the House there has been improved by the House of Commons Commission Act.

• (1620)

The setup there, as I understand it, is that the Speaker presides over the commission. The Leader of the House, whom we call the Government House Leader, is on that committee representing the Crown. A representative of the Leader of the Opposition—not necessarily the Leader of the Opposition but his nominee—is on that commission and a nominee of the third party. In subsequent years, with the continual growth of Parties in the House there, they may have problems.

At the moment we have three Parties in this House and certainly they should all be represented. The way the 1978 Act in Great Britain is phrased, it could be applicable here so that a Member of the New Democratic Party would be nominated. It would not have to be a Privy Councillor.

There are three other nominees from the House at large. These Members are not related to their Party standings. They are Members who are not of Cabinet rank. There could be Privy Councillors or backbenchers on this commission. That seems to be a bit more workable than the present situation, and certainly the situation proposed by the Hon. Member for Edmonton West.

The Hon. Member for Edmonton West in his speech earlier, and I read it this afternoon, took great exception to the fact that the Speaker was involved in the direct administration of the House. I may be misquoting him; if so, I certainly stand to be corrected and will allow him to interrupt and give the right impression. However, he seemed to object to the Speaker being an administrator.

I must draw to his attention that the Speaker's role in administration is well founded in parliamentary practice. I need only refer to Erskine May, Nineteenth Edition, Chapter 13, where it talks about the machinery of Parliament, pages 228 to 230. It is specific in talking not only about the Speaker's right as a presiding officer in the House of Commons, but at page 231 refers to the Speaker's powers over the administration of the House.

We should not shy away from the right of the Speaker as the first among equals in this House to be ultimately responsible for the administration of the House. In the first paragraph under the section "The Officers of the Commons", Erskine May talks in terms of the Speaker as "the representative of the House itself in its powers, proceedings and dignity". All of the Members of the House are represented in the Speaker. Certainly the Speaker should be the final arbiter of all matters affecting the House, not only privilege and procedure, as the Hon. Member for Edmonton West believes, but also administration. As we have seen recently, matters of