

A healthy democracy depends on participation and information, yet most of the recent reforms and the previous ones are not appreciated or they are dismissed as irrelevant. Canadians do not have a wide knowledge of the parliamentary system and how it works. That is part of the problem.

The changes that are happening in committee are not headline grabbing stuff. It is not on the news. It is not the stuff that gets reported. Ignorance in the best sense of the word, not in a pejorative sense, exists about the parliamentary system.

What we see reported are the partisan fights in this place, the antics. We see very little about the positive, mundane parliamentary happenings which in the end are so much more important. As I said the debate now seems to focus on the issues of free votes and party discipline.

Let us look at that in some detail. First, the majority of votes in this House in fact are not on issues of substance. They are on technical details. We have a lot of votes but only a very small percentage of them is really of substance and something we want to give consideration to.

• (1630 )

The question is why cannot we all vote our own conscience. I am reminded of a political science study I saw asking people who came out of the election booth on election day why they voted and how they voted. What was their reason? Forty per cent of the votes were a reflection of—

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois):** The minister's time is up unless he obtains unanimous consent to continue. Is there consent?

On a point of order the hon. parliamentary secretary.

**Mr. Cooper:** Mr. Speaker, the minister was just beginning to enter into a question that is very important to all members of this House, and that is the whole question of free votes. I might ask if he would take some time now to respond to that issue which is very much a concern of mine.

[*Translation*]

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois):** The question is very simple. The Standing Orders provide that a member can exceed the 20 minute period if there is unanimous consent. Is there unanimous consent?

### *The Address*

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**Some hon. members:** No.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois):** Questions and comments. The honorable member for Ottawa—Vanier.

**Some hon. members:** Question!

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois):** I will recognize you after the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier.

**Mr. Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier):** Mr. Speaker, I admit the minister in question touched on an important topic, namely the question of free vote. I would like to ask him to explain his conception of what would be a free vote, briefly of course, in view of what occurred in this House when the government itself, on the opposition's initiative, wanting to reaffirm the confidence of the House in our health system, which is excellent, voted against the motion, giving as an excuse that it involved the confidence in the government. This is a good example of a situation where the government could explain us how and in what context we could use the free vote.

[*English*]

**Mr. Andre:** Well, Mr. Speaker, I regret that I have run out of time because I do do want to say, and I will address the question of my colleague, that it is my intention to ask the management committee of the House to look at a number of changes that could occur.

In terms of how we deal with legislation, perhaps one of the reasons we have partisan debates so often on pieces of legislation is the way they are introduced. At second reading the minister explains it in the House, the opposition is almost duty-bound to oppose it, and we are into partisan differences immediately.

I want to ask the committee to look at pre-studied bills after first reading. Bills could be sent to committee after first reading so that the explanation of the details of the bill can be done in a less partisan atmosphere than is now the case, and to see if in turn we cannot have a more limited second reading debate and free votes.

I want to look at the implication of free votes in terms of what it does to the nature of the country. We are one of the unique countries where no one is actually elected on a national basis. We all represent constituencies. We have to ask ourselves if we had truly free votes where everybody represents their constituents, why would there ever be an incentive for my honoured colleague to vote for support for grain farmers since he has none in his constituency, and why would there ever be an incentive