

*Government Orders*

The ability of the House of Commons as a whole to call the government to account is also being reduced. The reduction of the normal annual sitting time by eight weeks means that there are 40 fewer days during which the government is obliged to deal with the Question Period. There will be 40 fewer days in which ordinary citizens' petitions may be presented to Parliament.

There will be 40 fewer days in which emergency debates to deal with urgent national development may be proposed, and there will be 40 fewer days in which it is likely that committees will be able to find quorums in order to pursue their business.

There will be 40 more days each year in which the government will be able to function in semi-secrecy. There will be 40 more days for the government to pursue its own hidden agenda, whatever it may be, and 40 more days for the government to escape the public eye and the scrutiny, if you will, of the national media.

The government asserts that its proposed eight fewer weeks a year is designed to make members of Parliament more effective. In fact, this proposal can have no effect other than to make members of Parliament less effective. It represents a 20 per cent dilution of the focus of parliamentary work, and it represents an attempt in my view and in the view of my party of an unpopular government trying to hide its misbehaviour from the people of Canada.

It is not content with reducing the time that the House sits. The government also proposes to make it more difficult for members to be effective when the House is permitted to sit. It proposes to add hours of sitting. That will reduce the time that members have to make adequate preparation for debate, diminish the amount of time available for committee meetings and erode the amount of time available for members to perform the very constituency related duties that the government claims it is so concerned with.

Until very recently, changes in the sitting hours of the House was very slight and came very slowly. After Confederation, the House sat at 3 p.m. on Monday through Friday and since most members lived well over a

day's journey from Ottawa, Saturdays were often used for committee meetings.

This was not as leisurely an approach as it appeared because the House did not have automatic time of adjournment and frequently sat into the small hours of the morning. Nonetheless, it left mornings free for constituency work or in the case of ministers, departmental work and members could find the time for a fulsome and unhurried Victorian lunch before settling in for the day's debates. That was years ago. Some members at that time complained that the rigours of late night sittings left them in no condition for the next day's work, but the hours of sitting were unchanged for well over 40 years.

• (1640)

In 1906 the hour of meeting was advanced to 2 p.m. and Wednesday night sittings were eliminated. For 85 years the institutionalized Wednesday evening off has been invaluable to members for meeting their constituents, for dealing with many other non-parliamentary obligations and in the case of those who have brought their young families to Ottawa, for giving them at least one night in seven of something approaching a normal family existence.

For another 20 years the House did not have an automatic adjournment hour, although there was a working arrangement under which the government would usually move the adjournment around 11 p.m.

For the 40 years after World War II there was frequent experimentation with the sitting hours, and most significant and enduring of which was the replacement of Friday evening sittings with Friday morning sittings in order to enable the majority of members to travel to their constituencies for the weekends.

Finally in 1982, all of the often disruptive and counter-productive evening sittings were replaced by morning sittings.

Now the government is proposing to add an hour on a day of government business to each sitting. It is doing this by asking the House to sit earlier on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays and later on Wednesdays and Fridays.