

particularly to minority groups in North America and elsewhere, have lost or are losing confidence in the democratic process. Many feel that they no longer can have their day in court. I do not altogether agree with this assessment, but there is absolutely no doubt about the steady and planned erosion of the rights of this House and the substitution of authoritarian rule by the executive which is involved all too often with the personality cult. Parliamentary systems must not only work; they must be very visible and be seen to be working.

Let the government be made aware right at the beginning of the present session that we will not facilitate the operation of committees involving the continuation of practices about which we complained during the last session. Reforms and improvements must be brought about. My colleague who spoke yesterday, the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath), dealt with this matter to some extent and spoke in detail about many of the things which I might have spoken about now. With respect to such things as travel, the holding of meetings and the co-ordination of meetings of committees, I say it is obvious that, unless there is some better measure of control than was the case last year, the proceedings of this House might just as well be scrapped, because slowly and surely the emphasis is being placed on the committees and taken away from this House. Since we are dealing with this particular area of controversy, we think it must be made abundantly clear that committees exist to clarify, to investigate, to examine and to help to facilitate the proceedings of the House; and they must at all times be subordinate to the sittings of the House of Commons, the operations of the House of Commons and the decisions which are made in this place.

For example, there is a need for some bills and some estimates to be considered in Committee of the Whole and in Committee of Supply. There must be an assurance of greater objectivity and freedom from government supervision in respect of committee chairmen. There must be more opportunities to test the views of members by dividing the House on some committee reports or by permitting amendments so that minorities on those committees can put forward their positions in the House on specific issues. These are very reasonable suggestions, Mr. Speaker. I ask the minister now if he will not, before this debate is concluded, give an undertaking that within a limited period of time terms of reference will be proposed which will direct the Committee on Procedure and Organization to deal specifically and immediately with this problem so that we on this side of the House, as well as members on the government side, may have some assurance that committees will function well and accept their proper role in the House, as must be the case at all times.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, may I say that many of the rule changes which were brought in have been effective but many of them have been shown to be not effective. They need to be examined. This examination ought to include an examination of the committee system and the new structure which was established.

My party will always go along with reasonable changes in the rules provided it is made crystal clear that the

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function of the House of Commons remains the principal object of our meetings in the House. I therefore hope that before this debate is concluded the minister will direct his attention to the issue and, hopefully, indicate that the very serious problems we have brought up, which have also concerned the members of his party for some time, will be met and dealt with. We hope this assurance will be given before further requests are made to establish other committees, standing or special, of this House.

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I realize that the discussion which the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) has opened up during the course of our dealing with this motion is an important one. I hope it is not unkind for me to say that he has ranged a bit from the wording of the motion. I do not see anything wrong with that. In fact I think it is a good idea. I support his position that we should take a new look and certainly that we should maintain a continuing look at our committee system. He has pointed out some of the improvements that are needed. He said that the changes that we made were not all negative, that some of the changes with respect to the committee system have worked out well. I wish to emphasize that fact.

• (12:10 p.m.)

I am not happy about all the rule changes that we made in the last two or three years, but I believe it was a tremendous improvement to send practically all bills, after second reading, to standing committees. I think the work that standing committees have done on bills which have been referred to them is good.

I believe it was a forward step to abolish the duplication of debate that we used to have when on occasion we would send a bill to a standing committee where it would be dealt with at length and then we would have the same debate in the Committee of Whole House. By the report stage we have preserved the right of members of the House who are not members of a particular committee to make their contribution to the details of any bill.

I am almost prepared to say without qualification that I think that the changes in the rules which had to do with the legislative process are good. I referred to the fact that after second reading bills go to committee where they are thoroughly studied. We then have the report stage. Members who wish can then deal with details. We can have recorded votes on contentious issues followed by final or third reading.

In any criticisms that we make of our new rules, or of our committee system in particular, it is appropriate to record that in this area we have done well. It is also my impression that committees are doing a good job when studying white papers. There are times when the argument gets quite intense, as it ought to, and this is an innovation that has worked out well, namely, that white papers are referred to committees and the public is permitted to appear before those committees. I happen to be a member of a committee that is doing this right now with respect to the subject of unemployment insurance. I