

*Petitions to Parliament*

permitted, but at least the Bill could be moved to a committee of petitions and dealt with by Members of Parliament.

If petitions related to personal grievances they could then be deemed to be of urgent necessity. In this case they could be debated immediately in the House. That has not occurred very often in Great Britain since the rule change in 1843; in fact, it has happened only once. All Bills did not have to go to committee, and there was still the opportunity to debate a Bill in the House of Commons if it was considered urgent.

The report of the Committee on Public Petitions was printed. It stated the subject of the petition, the number of signatures, and was headed by the prayer of the petition. The Committee had the power to send for persons, papers, records and was entitled to make special reports on any matter it thought the House should know about. On the other hand, the Committee had no power to investigate or report on the merits of any petition or interrogate representatives of Government Departments or person as to possible remedial action.

The Committee dealt with every public petition presented to the House until 1974 when the practice was discontinued. They now follow a practice which I think this Parliament should seriously consider and which is the subject of my Bill—that all petitions shall be printed by the Clerk of the House after the normal procedure transmits those petitions to the Minister of the Crown. The Minister of the Crown must then make a recommendation or an observation on the Bill before the House of Commons, and that is tabled and printed.

That is some of the history of the procedure now used in Great Britain and which we have copied to a great extent in Canada.

There was an occasion on which debate on a petition took place after the rule change. That was in June, 1944. The urgent part of the petition concerned the fact that letters had been opened secretly by the Post Office. That was considered to be an invasion of privacy, so the petition was debated immediately. That opportunity still exists in this Parliament.

We are all very familiar with the practice of presenting petitions to this House, Mr. Speaker. A petition can be presented by any Member, who may not make a speech but has the opportunity to make a brief statement about the author of the petition, the number of signatures and the allegation it contains. The Member may also read what is called the "prayer".

The petition is then automatically referred to the Clerk of Petitions, and next day he reports back to the House on whether it meets the requirements of the Standing Order. The Speaker reports on the petition, which is tabled. It is then read to the House by the Clerk, and if it is in proper form it may, with unanimous consent, be read by the Clerk and, again with unanimous consent, it may be sent to committee; otherwise, no debate is permitted and the petition does not go to any committee.

The only exception to this is when a petition complains of some present personal grievance requiring an immediate

remedy, in which case the matter may be discussed immediately. There has never been an occasion when the subject matter of a petition has been ruled to be of such urgency as to require discussion in the House.

The rules also say that the petitions must meet certain requirements. They must relate to a matter over which Parliament has control. Petitions may not ask for the expenditure of money and may not pray for exemptions from any import or export duties.

In Canada we have used the urgency provision twice, which is more often than it has been used in Great Britain. On one occasion it was used by a colleague, Donald MacInnis, whose petition requested an improved early retirement benefit for former coal miners of the Cape Breton Development Corporation. With the unanimous consent of the House, that petition was allowed to move to committee.

In 1962 the petition of Mr. McNally, then a Member of Parliament, requested Parliament to allow admission to Parliament of the Press Gallery Association. This petition was also allowed to go to committee. So we have some examples of that usage, but we have very few examples of petitions being debated in the House or in committee and remedial action being taken.

I think many citizens of Canada want to see something happen as a result of their petition. When they ask a Member of Parliament what they can do about certain issues, what procedures they can take, we can answer that they can lobby Members of Parliament with a grievance and ask that it be discussed. If there is no possibility of doing that through Question Period of Private Members' Hour or Government legislation, one of the few options is the petition. We can tell our constituents that they may present a grievance to Parliament through a petition, but then the obvious question is, what happens to that petition? That is when I have some difficulty, Mr. Speaker, because nothing really happens to the petition. Through the procedures I have just outlined, it is read but then disappears. The only response a constituent may see is a few lines in *Hansard* to show that his Member of Parliament did present the petition.

That is why I am asking the House to look at the Bill which asks that after presentation of a petition to the Senate or the House of Commons in accordance with the rules, a Minister or a Member of Parliament should respond in the House within two weeks. The petition could then be referred to a committee of the House without debate.

Under the new rules the committee would have the option of taking up the subject matter or not, but at least the petitioners would have the opportunity to see that the petition was dealt with by a Minister of the Crown who would then be compelled to respond in the House within two weeks of the tabling of the petition.

I looked at this to see whether our neighbour, the United States, had anything similar to this request that I am making to the House today, and they do. In the House of Representatives in the United States, after a petition is presented to the House by a Member, he can request that that petition be