

Supply

what could be done to improve the effective participation of Members of Parliament as Members of Parliament.

I think it is quite possible, indeed I would say in the context not merely of recent events but of the performance of Parliament in recent years it is more than possible, it is desirable, if we are to restore effective respect across the country for Parliament itself, that we act now.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Broadbent: I listened with interest to what the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) had to say and, of course, I have read the report tabled by the then leader of the Conservative government in the House. I want to say on behalf of my colleagues that we find many of the ideas, probably the majority, quite acceptable and desirable and would like to see them implemented soon.

I want to make some specific suggestions about what we think would be desirable and would make this place more effective in dealing with legislation and more just in terms of giving rights to members.

Whatever changes we make in the rules and practices of the House, in my view there is a very important matter that goes well beyond the rules. It is essential to the working of any democratic institution, any democratic government, whether in continental Europe, the United States or here. That is the question of trust, Mr. Speaker. I will put it bluntly. In my view, no changes that we make, indeed no changes that will be accepted by all of us in the future in regard to the procedures, rules and practices of this House, would have avoided, in my judgment, had they already been in effect, the recent two-week impasse in Parliament. I will come back to that point in a few minutes.

Important as practices and rule changes are, in a democracy, both outside this institution in society as a whole and in this institution, attitudinal questions are of fundamental importance to the functioning of our system. I want to put forward a few things that we think are desirable that were set out in the white paper put forward by the former Conservative government and which we think should be acted upon reasonably soon.

The suggestion that speeches be reduced from 40 minutes to 20 minutes duration makes very good sense.

As for idea of having fixed adjournment dates so that not only Members of Parliament and their families know when we recess for Christmas, summer or Easter, but constituents know on a regular basis when they may expect their Member of Parliament to return to the constituency, it is time we got better organization into our lives in Parliament. This would have a net benefit beyond our immediate circumstances. This is about the only legislative body in the world that does not have fixed adjournment dates and this change is long overdue.

On behalf of my colleagues I want to say very seriously that we believe committees need to be strengthened. That could be an important step not only for the feeling of more effective participation by regular Members of Parliament but the reality of their participation, if it were done in a serious way,

would not put into jeopardy the fundamental principle of parliamentary or cabinet government, namely, the government's responsibility to govern and the opposition's responsibility to be effective critics on behalf of the people of Canada.

We think the committees would be strengthened immeasurably by providing them with their own independent staff. These staffs would be there on a permanent basis. Hopefully some of them would acquire seniority and expertise over the years so that when Parliaments change, committees and regular backbenchers would have competent, professionally trained committee staffs to advise on technical matters of which they must be aware. This would improve the performance of all Members of Parliament, but particularly I think it is important for regular members who are not in cabinet or in leading positions of opposition parties.

● (1640)

The committees ought to be able, on their own initiative, to decide to study certain subject matters. They should not be dependent upon a reference from cabinet or from government to initiate work in a certain direction.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Broadbent: I should like to deal with another item which goes more directly to the other side of the House than to this side. Hon. members on both sides must come to grips with the reality that it now takes almost twice as long to produce legislation in the House of Commons than it did ten years ago. As members of Parliament, we must all be concerned about this fact. We must improve the efficiency with which we deal with legislation, because housing and unemployment problems are real and energy bills must be dealt with.

Speaking as the leader of an opposition party and on behalf of my colleagues, I say that we must come to grips with the issue of timetabling to meet the legitimate need of government to govern. Also we should provide ample opportunity for opposition parties to make their points in debate when they disagree with the government. I happen to think it can be done. Most legislative systems in the world accomplished it a long time ago. We should look at the timetabling principle in a serious way. We should accept the notion, but then say that for each opposition party in each session there could perhaps be two or three bills to which the normal timetabling for the scheduling of bills would not apply, and that there would be no fixed limits in the debate on the two or three bills selected in each session by opposition parties. I simply put that forward as one suggestion among a number of means one might select to implement the idea.

In supporting the reference to committee before the House, we should have a very hard look at the West German experience in terms of the allocation of time of Members of Parliament. At present Members of Parliament know very well that we have obligations to legislate and to debate important matters of substance before the House, to present legislation on the government side, to criticize it on the opposition side,