

Abortion

idea that one million Canadians can express their views on a matter of this importance and not have any debate in Parliament, or any legislative action taken, compounds the difficulties.

This brings us to a situation in which many private members of Parliament find themselves, particularly the hon. member for Vaudreuil. There are others, such as the hon. member for Beaches (Mr. Richardson), and the hon. member for Edmonton East (Mr. Yurko), who have bills before this House. I am sorry if I do not remember every member who has a private bill in this House which is designed to correct this anomaly we are facing. Private members have to try to repair this injustice in the application of a badly worded law, the results of which are becoming worse by the year. What happens to these private bills? They come up for debate for an hour. There is not sufficient time for real analysis of their contents. Few of them ever get to committee.

● (1620)

The government has brought in a paper on reform of Parliament, the position paper introduced by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Baker) a few days ago, and the changes in this document, among other things, would specify a certain number of private members' bills being brought to a vote. I myself believe that if we are serious in defending the rights of private members to bring their concerns before Parliament in the expectation of a vote in a reasonable number of cases, we ought to expedite the process of that position paper through Parliament by a quick acceptance of a motion on the order paper so there will not be a protracted debate on the motion itself, and then by getting that motion into committee so that serious work can begin on the reform of Parliament among which would then be the assurance that a certain number of private members' bills would be brought to a vote.

I believe the hon. member for Vaudreuil has done a service to Parliament this afternoon by emphasizing the need for an examination in committee of the whole question of abortion. Such an examination has not been undertaken for 11 years. Some of us have been in Parliament, now, for going on eight years and we have never had an opportunity to deal with the subject. Yet we have had two full-scale debates on capital punishment during that period. It is an important question, obviously, but if there can be two full-scale debates and votes on the issue of capital punishment since 1973—and one hears, now, suggestions of a third—I believe the time has come to state clearly that there are many members, and I am one of them, who believe that the abortion question which affects the lives of 62,000 individuals annually should certainly be discussed and a position taken with regard to it.

I shall not even attempt to go into the whole question here that the fetus is a premature human being; I think the scientific evidence is fairly clear on that question; we are not talking about some abstract matter, what we are talking about is incipient life in the womb of the mother.

The bill brought forward by the hon. member for Vaudreuil contains some weaknesses. My bill has some weaknesses in it.

[Mr. Roche.]

Perhaps other private members' bills have some weaknesses in them, too. The point is, it is not weaknesses in these bills which are important. It is important that progress be made toward the construction of a bill which will meet the needs of the situation and will meet with some consensus in this House. I believe there is a consensus. I cannot prove it because I have never had a chance for a vote. But I do believe there is an emerging consensus from within the country—some of the statistics the committee will be able to study will bear this out—that what a growing number of people want is a law which would allow a mother to have an abortion when her life and health are seriously threatened, where the continuance of a pregnancy would be a very serious threat to her well-being.

I will not go beyond that now. It is the job of the doctors and of the professionals to make that determination and to find the language to put it into law. I believe mothers have a right to such protection. But society has an obligation to protect all lives, including incipient human life, and increasing numbers of people recognize the validity of what I said in the earlier part of my comments, namely, that the law, whatever its intentions, has produced a situation in which it has been abused, and it is the abuse of the present law which we see in the figures of 62,000, it is the abuse to which an increasing number of members of Parliament wish to address themselves.

If other members have a better suggestion, by all means let us hear from them in this debate, but I am advancing the specific thought that maybe a way out of this dilemma would be to establish an all-party committee to work out the terms of a bill—if it has to work on an ad hoc basis, then let it—which would find some general acceptance in this House and which would have a chance for passage, a bill that would appeal to many members of Parliament, if not all, who want to see justice done toward human life in this country, who want to see justice done to pregnant women who have very serious difficulties in the continuation of their pregnancies, and who want to see justice done to the lives of the unborn.

This is not just a religious question. It is not just a philosophical or humanitarian question. It is a question of civil rights. We have to address ourselves to the civil rights of unborn children, and that is very much within the domain and, indeed, the obligation of members of Parliament. I suggest that serious thought be given in the House to the construction of such a committee to work out a pattern of legislation which would stand a reasonable chance of passage in the House and that, in any event, expedition be given to the motion in the name of the President of the Privy Council to bring forward the paper on the reform of Parliament so that the rights of private members would be enhanced, especially in matters like this.

Mr. John Reimer (Kitchener): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to recommend the adoption of the bill sponsored by the hon. member for Vaudreuil (Mr. Herbert). I so agree with the comments of my hon. friend from Edmonton South. When we come to the discussion of a bill such as the one before us it is with humility and hesitancy that I rise to make my contribution.