

These reforms would do more to restore some credibility to the House and its occupants than another roving committee of so-called great Canadians could.

• (1550)

It goes on, Mr. Speaker, but I think it makes the point very well.

The Canadian political system can no longer tolerate that level of debate, that kind of language, the extreme shrill noisy level of debate, a level which I humbly suggest has sunk far too low with those last outrageous claims by the opposition parties, particularly the New Democratic Party. Canadians deserve a better opposition, not just opposing for the sake of opposing, which is what we are seeing here. They need more rational, intelligent opposition and analysis through better quality debates, more fair and technical review of legislation, through more pre-study and constructive committee work. That is what these reforms are all about, making us more relevant to the times, recognizing what Canadians have been asking for, better quality representation both in Ottawa in Parliament and in the constituencies in direct contact with the elector.

However, rather than that constructive and reasoned input Canadians are fed the standard pat, shrill claims from the outraged opposition.

Not once in the last several months during our almost daily discussions with the Liberals and the NDP have I heard about these objections. There was never a word about constitutionality, not a peep about the theory that we would only sit one day, no mention that the NDP will take these to court, not one word in all of those meetings.

It is offensive that they both actually contributed items to the package. How can they take such active part on the one hand and yet profess the extreme indignation on the other?

Our work with the opposition has a long track record and tradition. Just to go back over the history: Prior to March 1990, my predecessor, the present Minister of Transport, actually raised the issue. In March 1990, discussions on rule changes were held and I was present, as were the current leader of the New Democratic Party and the past House leader of the Liberal Party.

In July 1990, as a result of an all-party agreement, the House leaders travelled to the United Kingdom to review standing orders and discuss the British parliamen-

tary practice. There were two representatives from the Liberal Party, there were three from the Conservative Party, and at the last minute the representative of the New Democratic Party had to cancel.

A package of proposals was assembled through my offices and on December 5 I wrote to the Clerk of the House indicating that with the approval of the three House leaders, we would ask the Clerks to provide expert assistance in writing into the language of our rules those proposed rule changes that were written out in more descriptive fashion in the proposal.

On December 20, 1990, we put forward an initial package with some degree of clarity to the opposition for its review and comment. On March 1 the House of Commons Clerk prepared a preliminary draft of the rule changes for review and discussion in a package. On March 19, after several discussions between them, the House leaders met and final discussions and negotiations were completed before caucus presentations on March 20.

On March 20 the New Democratic Party contacted the House of Commons Clerk, withdrawing approval for any further drafting assistance. On March 22 we filed the rule changes with the House of Commons at 2.15 p.m.

Every step of the way it was a fully co-operative process. There was no sneaking up with rule changes that had not been fully discussed.

That is not to imply there was approval with every single step. It is to say, as I said earlier, there were no surprises and there was no indication to me that these were Fascistic, Draconian or perhaps subject to court challenge, as is implied by the House Leader of the New Democratic Party.

What do they do in general? Key to the rule changes was the question of a calendar that would provide for more time for members of Parliament to be in their constituencies. Initially we had two proposals on the table, as a matter of fact. One proposal would have us go to a four-day week, with not sitting on Fridays. The other proposal was for a program that basically said one week a month would be free for members to do other things.

In the end it was agreed, particularly by the New Democratic Party, but of members from my party from western Canada who also felt quite strongly that the one week off a month was the preferable option because of distances involved, and the difficulty they had in getting back to their constituents and then back to Ottawa.