

Supply

If you have a taste for irony, Mr. Speaker, I guess it will probably be satisfied this evening because here we are, following a two week impasse in Parliament which tied up the business of the nation and prevented members from meeting in this chamber, and the first piece of business Parliament is called back to deal with is a debate on the issue of parliamentary reform, trying to make this institution work again. Yet what we find is that throughout most of this debate, about 85 or 90 of the seats in this House have been vacant. Also, to the best of my knowledge, not once this evening was anyone sitting in the Press Gallery to report on the activities here.

Now, I say this, Mr. Speaker, not as a criticism of my colleagues for not being here this evening because I know something about the schedules which members keep. There is a myth that Members of Parliament are not busy, that there is not a great deal for them to do. Most MPs do put in 70 to 80-hour weeks, and there is a great deal that they would be doing this evening such as attending standing committees, dealing with correspondence or speaking to various groups across the country, or solving constituents' problems. Nor am I critical of the members of the press for not being here. However, I would say to you, Mr. Speaker, that the empty seats here this evening speak far more eloquently to the need for parliamentary reform than anything that has been said by any of us here. Members are absent this evening because they know that what happens in this chamber is not of great importance compared to their other responsibilities. Until we can restore this institution to a place of prominence, a place of centrality in our democratic system, this sort of sorry record is going to continue.

What is happening, Mr. Speaker, is that Parliament is fast becoming irrelevant. As we broke for the supper hour this evening I looked at the fossilized limestone from which the Parliament buildings are made. They were quarried in Manitoba—

Mr. Mayer: Hear, hear!

Mr. Beatty: My colleague from Manitoba is impressed with that fact. In any event, it is fascinating to walk through the halls and see the fossils which are caught in the limestone. I think there is probably no better symbol for this institution, perhaps, than that fossilized limestone of which the walls are made. It gives testimony to the fact that there was once a living, breathing organism there, but today there is a hollow shell, rigid and dead. To a great extent that is what we find in the House of Commons under the present circumstances.

What we have is an institution which was once vibrant, living, important and central to our democratic system, yet today we find it is hollow and irrelevant. The choice we are faced with this evening is whether we are going to allow that decline to continue, whether we will allow the ossification of Parliament to continue unchecked, or whether we will take action to try to breathe some life into the institution and restore it to a position of prominence.

What importance will this debate today have? Well, it may give a chance to some of the members on the treasury benches to blow off steam. For others, including my colleague, the hon. member for London West, who gave such a thoughtful speech

earlier, it will be an opportunity to put their ideas on the record as to how Parliament can be reformed, and students of political science will be able to read *Hansard* and look at the various suggestions. But the real issue, I suppose, is whether in fact the debate will lead to a reform of Parliament. Will it in fact lead to a revitalization of this institution, or will it simply give us the opportunity to reaffirm, to give a pledge of allegiance to Parliament and say that we believe in the institution and it is important, and that we lament the fact that Parliament has fallen on hard times? That is really the issue we are being forced to deal with today.

When I watched the hon. member for London West on CFPL I was studying political science at the University of Western Ontario. Anyone who has read a political science textbook has learned about where political scientists feel that Parliament fits into our representative system; it is central. And much of the study which takes place in universities across the country on political science deals with the role of Parliament and how it is the central institution in our democratic system. Here is where decisions are supposed to be made as to the future of our country. Here is where the course, the very direction that the country will be taking, is decided. At least that is the theory, but in fact it is not the practice. The fact is that for many Members of Parliament their most important function takes place on election night when, by their election, they help to determine who the prime minister will be and which of the prime minister's colleagues will form the cabinet. There are members in this House who are relevant and do play an important role; but by and large that role, that importance and that responsibility come to them not by virtue of being members of the House of Commons but rather by virtue of being members of the cabinet. For so many Members of Parliament, the responsibility which is left is to act as ombudsmen, to cajole, to persuade, to prod, to embarrass, to try to get members of cabinet to change their minds once they have made up their minds, or to adopt a particular position before a decision has been made.

• (2150)

That is not the role that I understood Parliament should be playing. It is not a role which I think is fulfilling for most Members of Parliament. It is not a role which I think the average Canadian who voted for us to come here expects us to be discharging. Parliamentarians have become ombudsmen and spokesmen instead of legislators. If we have a job to do here, we must surely restore this institution to a place where, in fact, it is central to our system of government and where, in fact, decisions are made and where, in fact, there is some point to representing our constituents here. We should have the opportunity to do something to change the conditions which affect the average Canadian.

I feel frustrated, and I know that hon. Members opposite also feel frustrated, by the inability of members of Parliament to do the job that they would like to do in representing their constituents. I would like to cite one example. I have received a