

Standing Orders

● (1520)

The motion now before the House concerning the Standing Orders represents in that respect a failure to achieve concurrence among Members of the House and among the House Leaders. It must be clearly pointed out and recognized that everybody agrees the desirable course is consultation, consent and concurrence. When that concurrence cannot be achieved, when unanimity is not achievable, then the Government must act. It is in that context, the necessity for government action to establish permanent Standing Orders for the conduct of the business of the House of Commons, that I make these remarks.

The motion before the House, as I indicated yesterday, Madam Speaker, is to prevent the difficult situation that would arise if the House of Commons reverted to the Standing Orders that existed on December 7, 1984. In the absence of an agreement to continue the current revised, changed and amended Standing Orders of the House, we would be back to the situation that existed over three and a half years ago and we would have lost the beneficial changes that have been made in the interval. We would also miss the opportunity to make even more effective changes to the rules.

The process of changing the rules of the House of Commons is interesting. It was pointed out by an opposition Member yesterday that there had been no change in the rules since 1969 that was not achieved through unanimous consent of the Members of the House of Commons, an indication in itself that insufficient attention has been paid to amending from time to time the Standing Orders of the House. These are not rules and regulations to be written in stone and left unchanged for decades. The House must find on a day-to-day basis that there are obvious areas in which the rules under which the House operates can be improved. When that capability of improving the processes and procedures of the House is thrown away simply because of the difficulty involved in establishing amending provisions, then I do not think we have discharged our responsibility, either to ourselves or to the broader public interested in the procedures of the House of Commons.

The fact that amendments have not been made in the past is no excuse for reviewing the situation in light of current experiences and seeking to achieve better rules and regulations for the conduct of the business of the House. I think the fact that the rules of the House tend to be cast in stone is something that is not in the interests of all Members. If and when the rules are adopted, it should be on the understanding that they can be changed from time to time as experience dictates. I think we have taken the attitude that the rules are virtually inflexible and unchangeable, and as a result the procedures and processes in the House have become stilted and formalized to the point that they no longer reflect the desire of elected Members of Parliament to effect changes or to achieve new levels of efficiency, in the conduct of public business.

I spent three weeks this year at Westminster in the Parliament of the United Kingdom. I had the opportunity to observe at first hand the conduct of the British House of Commons. One is amazed at the maturity with which Members of the

House of Commons there, the House Leaders and indeed individual Members, conduct the public business in that historic parliamentary forum.

We have in the new rules that are being presented, along with the motion introduced by the Deputy Prime Minister, new provisions with respect to time allocation. If we had in this House of Commons the kind of maturity that has been achieved in the U.K. House of Commons, we probably would not need rules respecting time allocation. I was amazed in speaking to the House Leaders of all Parties in the U.K., the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the SDP and the Liberal Party, that they have no difficulty in deciding among themselves how much time to allow for a particular Bill or other measure introduced in the House of Commons. The arguments generated in their discussion relate to whether there may be one day, two days or three days of debate allowed. They may have some difficulty in coming to a specific agreement, but in no case does one Party prolong and protract debate for the purpose of achieving some other matter that the Party seeks to achieve in the House of Commons. The bargaining does not extend to the forcing of the Government into actions that it might not otherwise be willing to take or that are not necessarily in the interests of the public or part of government policy.

Mr. Keeper: Do they ring bells?

Mr. Crosby: In short, Madam Speaker, the rules are not used to blackmail the Government into actions. I think that is the path down which this House has trod to its detriment. Whatever was the experience in the past, I do not think any Member or any opposition Party ought to hold the Government to ransom by use of the rules of the House.

It may be justified in very extreme cases but it is now occurring almost on a day to day basis. I do not cast any aspersions or accusations of improper conduct on any Member of the House or any political Party that uses the technicalities of the rules as they are currently constituted. That practice has grown. But there comes a time in the history of this House that we ought to aspire to the kind of maturity evidenced in the British House of Commons to try to change those things.

There are many other ways of making points and appealing to the public on a particular meritorious issue. There is no need to torture the rules of practice and procedures in any chamber, and especially the House of Commons, being the national Parliament of Canada, in order to achieve the purposes of one Member or one political Party.

It is in that difficult context, in that difficult parliamentary situation, in which we look at the motion presented by the Deputy Prime Minister. The changes that are introduced with the motion clarify some difficult areas. On balance I think the changes will result in a more efficient operation of the House and the better conduct of the public business. That is our responsibility as Members, to see that those kinds of effective changes are put into operation. I recognize and realize that bargaining takes place, and I understand that. I hope that kind