

Points of Order

ask you to advise us immediately on those change in plans. Mr. Speaker, I thank you and the House for the opportunity to deal with this matter.

The matter is very serious in the minds of many Canadians. It is also serious to the future of the House and its deliberations in the next two years. When we cross the bridge of accepting the Reform Party of Canada as the official opposition or not, we will cross a bridge of democracy that will be either good for the country or will be an action that will not be good for our future in regard to unity.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is certainly not out of a lack of respect for my hon. colleague, but I will be brief.

The Parliament of Canada Act and the standing orders of the House of Commons recognize the minority party with the most members as the official opposition. I do not want to offend my colleague, but there are 53 of us and 52 of them.

[English]

Mr. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do not think I will take quite as long as the House leader of the Reform Party, but perhaps I will not be quite as brief as the House leader of the Bloc Quebecois.

Essentially three arguments were brought before you, this morning, Mr. Speaker: one invoking democracy, the second on the role of the opposition, and the third on the designation of the Leader of the Opposition within the context set in the second argument.

It was explained that there was doubt, at least in the mind of the House leader of the Reform Party, about the status of the Leader of the Opposition; that there was near parity in the House of Commons; and that the present Leader of the Opposition had given notice that at some point in the future he would no longer hold that position. This argument was brought to the House before and was raised by the Reform Party outside the House in the media at some point. Some months ago the Reform Party asked the Government of Canada to declare it to be the official opposition. The argument was presented that for ideological considerations the third party should be declared the official opposition, notwithstanding the fact that there was no precedent for doing this in the Canadian system and second, it was asking the government to choose its own opposition.

• (1100)

The argument was obviously very weak because if the government chose its own opposition based on ideological grounds and not on numbers what would stop it from choosing the party that is in fourth place, the New Democrats, to be the official opposition? After all, there are less of them and presumably that would be less offensive to the government. The argument could be made that they have been around longer and therefore have legitimacy.

What about the Conservative Party? It is in fifth place with two members. As a government that would suit us a lot better because there are less of them to object to government policy. After all the Conservatives were in power at the time of Confederation. If the argument follows, that would give them some claim to legitimacy. Why can we not invoke that?

If the government were ever put in the position where there would be a vote of the House choosing who the opposition would be, with all members voting, as was suggested some weeks ago, or the new twist of this morning of asking only opposition members to vote, the result would be the same.

The result would be the same because neither the government nor supporters of the government or anyone else, other than the Speaker, should choose who the Leader of the Opposition is in the House of Commons. Once we deviate from that we could be on very dangerous ground that would subvert parliamentary democracy.

I listened very patiently to the remarks of the previous speakers and they, the great advocates of democracy in what they refer to as an important debate, perhaps would care to listen for a few minutes and at the same time give the same respect that was given to them not that long ago.

Mr. Speaker, you will recall that on October 31 during question period the member for Lethbridge, the House leader of the Reform Party, asked a question which was tantamount to asking the government to recognize his party as the official opposition. That is on page 16028 of *Hansard*. At that time the request was made of the government. Now the request is made of the Speaker.

I have before me an article from the *Calgary Herald* of November 18 which quotes the member for Lethbridge. At that time he said: "As soon as he", referring to the Leader of the Opposition, "gives his letter of resignation the member for Lethbridge says he will be ready to rise in the House and make his case".

It seems that is not soon enough for the member. He rises today in anticipation of what he believes to be the future resignation of another member of the House.