

*Government Orders*

On that note, I wish to thank publicly on the floor of this House of Commons the superb work done by my colleague from Kingston and the Islands with regard to that.

Another proposal the government makes that is rather intriguing is its proposed new Standing Order 56.1. The government seeks to circumvent the awkward and down-right debilitating doctrine of unanimous consent.

For many years the House of Commons has used this doctrine to circumvent its rules, usually those involving notice. If nobody present objects, then it is considered fair to ignore the normal rules and proceed on the grounds of expediency.

There are some proceduralists who have always questioned the doctrine of unanimous consent on the grounds that, since the request for leave to circumvent the rules is usually in itself done without notice, the rights of members absent to be protected by the rules are subverted by the doctrine itself.

The government proposal goes a long way to correct this error. The government may have been motivated by a desire to avoid being obstructed by one or two members when the leadership of all groups in the House have agreed, but what it has come up with is, in fact, a considerable improvement, in my view.

Under the circumstances in which the government is proposing this rule, it is not improbable that unanimous consent on the spur of the moment will be less easily obtained, but this proposed rule offers a compromise, a method whereby a form of notice is in fact provided, and a fail-safe whereby a reasonably small number of members, at a time when attendance is usually high, may prevent the circumvention of the rules.

The remaining area of procedure that the government deals with in its proposal concerns the working of committees. This is a subject that has been actively discussed by members at least for the last 20 years in the House and is likely to continue the evolution of the committee system for many years to come.

In the post-Confederation period, there were only a handful of standing committees, each of which consisted of several dozen members and none of which did much more than consider the merits of proposed private bills, a

procedure that occupied a great deal of parliamentary time before general laws concerning incorporation, transportation, communications, et cetera, were enacted. From time to time standing or special committees conducted special investigations of issues, but only at the initiation of the House itself.

Any bill that was referred to a standing or special committee still had to follow the regular legislative process, including a committee of the whole stage.

Gradually, the memberships of the standing committees were reduced to more workable sizes and, commencing in the mid-1950s, estimates were referred to standing committees for detailed study, although the estimates still had to be examined by the committee of supply as well.

In 1968, the foundations of the modern committee system were established with the procedural reforms that sent all estimates to standing committees and abolished the committee of supply and also sent most bills to standing committees rather than to the committee of the whole. The number of subject matter investigations increased as well.

Over the years the standing committees have continued to evolve. Their powers have been more clearly defined and enhanced and they have gained real roles in both the legislative and policy development processes. Many members, especially backbenchers on both sides of the House find that their most gratifying work comes in the less formal and less partisan form of committees. These bodies, however, are creatures of the House and inevitably reflect the political conflicts that preoccupy the House as a whole.

• (1720)

Until recently the government and opposition alike had no problem staffing committees. In the last 18 months, however, the political situation in the country has made, in my view, the government's backbenchers less willing to spend time on committees, thus making the task of the government whip in maintaining the government majority on committees far more difficult.

The response of the whips on the government side last autumn was to attempt to force a radical reduction in the size of the committees, thus reducing the number of government backbencher bodies that would have to be