

● (8:30 p.m.)

[*English*]

Right Hon. P.-E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, the members of this house have been entrusted with many heavy responsibilities by the people of Canada, but none is more far reaching in its results than our responsibility for the conduct of this house. All that we try to do is shaped, either helped or hindered, by the procedures of this house. If we, the members, cannot deal with the business of the House of Commons in an orderly fashion, surely we will undermine public confidence in our ability to deal with the business of the nation.

As members we take part in the life of parliament for a brief span of years; but parliament itself carries on over the centuries. We have inherited an institution that has grown through the years. This institution has incorporated the experience and wisdom of countless men and women. I am sure all hon. members will agree that in its general structure the parliamentary system of government corresponds better than any alternative to both the traditions and needs of Canadians.

Over the years our predecessors have adapted this system to the requirements of their times. We, in our turn, must not shrink from the contemporary changes of our society. We must not refuse to make the necessary adjustments and improvements in our institutions. For it is true that parliament and each of its component parts are, like living organisms, subject to the universal law of life: adapt or wither away. It is not sufficient for us merely to cherish this heritage as if it were a relic, of interest only to historians. We must reform it so that in our time it will serve us well. We must revitalize it so that our successors will receive from us, not an outdated, moribund survival from an earlier age, but a vital and responsive institution of democratic government.

[*Translation*]

In certain periods of time, the House of Commons changes imperceptibly either through gradual changes in social conditions or because of the personality and outlook of the parliamentarians themselves. From time to time, the standing orders are amended slightly to improve a procedure or correct an abuse. But the time comes when it might be necessary to make a complete review of our work methods and to arrive, in accordance with the findings of that study, at major changes in our standing orders.

Motion for Concurrence in Report

For a good ten years now the standing orders of the house have not been satisfactory. Several parliamentarians have often complained about that. Newspapermen, university professors have written articles about it, so much so that the public is now aware of the situation. During the last election campaign, the matter was even discussed openly: the candidates of all parties committed themselves in fact to parliamentary reform. Whatever party we represent in this house, we have, as elected representatives of the people, a clear and specific mandate to reform our methods of work. It is obvious that the Canadian people expect that their members do something about parliament.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Trudeau: In the face of the discontent expressed in a thousand and one ways, we must reply with a coherent and vigorous over-all reform of our rules, based on a thorough study of the present duties and program of the house.

[*English*]

In the last few years knowledgeable critics both inside and outside this house have raised many serious questions about our proceedings. Let us consider a few of them. In the first place, is the house keeping pace with the legislative requirements of the nation; or is it true that all too often laws are made or amended years too late? In a single session do we have an opportunity to examine systematically a full legislative program? In view of the irregularities of our sessions, can the members, the ministers or the civil servants who advise the government plan their work sufficiently in advance?

Second, does the opposition enjoy adequate opportunities throughout the session to bring on debates about the great issues of our public life? One of the principal functions of this house should be to hold such debates; members of the other parties have been saying so again today. Whatever party is in power, these debates should often be brought on by the opposition. They have suggested this, and I agree with it. An opposition, under the present situation, has some control over the topics discussed during the debates on the throne speech and the budget; but these debates normally occur only twice a year.

In addition, of course, there are the supply motions; but they are often concentrated in one or two short periods. In an orderly calendar for the session the opposition should have