

Procedure and Organization

Mr. Dinsdale: That is right; they are too green.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): And they will not be around here long enough to learn much, either.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Dinsdale: They are neophytes.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): For example, it used to be possible for the opposition, by withholding supply on the main estimates or interim supply, to keep the government at bay three, four or five times a year and obtain commitments and answers from the government on important issues. But now the government receives interim supply for three months on a certain date in March just as automatically as the coming of spring. It receives its main estimates for the full year on a certain day at the end of June just as automatically as the coming of summer. We have the right to vote against the main estimates, but who is going to vote against estimates which include money for agriculture, labour, pensions, or what have you, in the general package? The government does not know what struggles governments in the past have had to obtain this money. We have simplified the rules; we have made it easy for the government. I mentioned Mackenzie King a few minutes ago. I recall him very well. If he came back—

An hon. Member: He is back.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):—he would not recognize the rules of this place. Debate has to be limited, and we have accepted that principle. The time limit on all speeches used to be 40 minutes; now it is sometimes 30 minutes, 20 minutes, 10 minutes, 5 minutes, and we even have a 3 minute rule. We have all kinds of limitations. The point about limiting debate is that it is proper for us to do it, but we must do it by agreement and we must all share in the decision.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): My right to speak in this House of Commons is not given to me by the government, it is not given to me by the Prime Minister, it is given to me by the people of Winnipeg North Centre who sent me here.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

Mr. Burton: You boys had better remember it.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The right of the Prime Minister to speak in this house, his freedom of speech, is given to him not by the opposition or the government but by the people of Mount Royal who sent him here.

Some hon. Members: By Canada.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): No, Canada did not send the Prime Minister here.

An hon. Member: Yes, it did.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The people of Mount Royal sent him here. I say to you as strongly as I can, Mr. Speaker, that we come here as equals, every one of us, with the right to speak on behalf of our people in the parliament of Canada. It may be said to me: If we all exercised that right and there were no limit on debate, there would be no time for anything. My answer is that this is the reason we get together and by consent and with common sense do what will be fair to everyone. We reach agreement as to limitations we will impose upon ourselves. But these are limitations imposed by agreement amongst all of us. No majority, merely because it has a majority in this House of Commons, has the right to take away from members of this house freedom of speech which they do not want to surrender. That is what this government is trying to do by allocating time by a majority vote.

• (4:20 p.m.)

There is nothing wrong with parliament as a whole deciding to limit speech, provided we do it with the consent of all, perhaps not unanimously to the extent of every last member but certainly by general consent. That is what we have done across the years. Every change there has been in the amount of time members can take has been made under the tradition or procedures of this house which are being violated by the proposal today, despite the fine statement made by the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton. I submit that the whole question of the right of individual members to speak is a basic right given to them not by the government, not by the government house leader, no matter how much of a dictator he may be, not by a majority on the government side but the people who sent us here, and we are entitled to retain that right except in so far as we agree to surrender it on the basis of common sense.