

House of Commons Procedures

mand (Mr. Pennell), were moving amendments to change Government legislation. In a sense it seems to me that is the goal to which we may be moving if it is implicit in these new rules that the Opposition will have half the speaking time and the Government will have the other half.

The old idea normally was that a Government was anxious to get its legislation through and therefore it would apply party discipline. I do not mean that unkindly, but it would call on party unity and loyalty in order to see that debate was not prolonged by Government spokesmen. Is that all to be changed under the new rules?

Mr. Moreau: Would the hon. Member permit a question?

Mr. Fisher: Certainly.

Mr. Moreau: How does the hon. Member reconcile the argument he is making now with the argument made by his colleague, the hon. Member for Skeena (Mr. Howard), who was objecting to party principle being recognized at all? Is the hon. Member suggesting there is a different class of Member in the House?

Mr. Fisher: My own idea is that this is a delicate subject. I do not want to deprive any Members of the House, particularly those on the Government side, of opportunities to speak, but this is a problem we are approaching if we have limits on debate.

I note that my friends in the Official Opposition have concentrated quite a bit of their time in this debate in making derogatory and downgrading remarks about the role of members in the minor parties. I say to them that under these new rules we have much more to fear than they have because of a tradition, with regard particularly to the position of the Leader of the Opposition, a position from which he cannot be dislodged. I mean he can be dislodged from it by the electoral process but not within the traditions of this House so long as his party constitutes the Official Opposition.

We in the minor parties have much more to fear from the new rules and limitations than many, particularly if there is the practice of timing debates and then dividing the ratio of speakers according to the time, with the Government getting 50 per cent. The Official Opposition may suffer under this but we will suffer much more proportionately.

I do not agree with the figures put forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strath-

cona as to the conditions during the regime from 1958 to 1962. Until it has been proven to me by some kind of quantitative analysis, I just cannot believe that our little group of eight took up 35 per cent of the time. I just do not believe that, but I will concede to the Leader of the Opposition, not that he asked for the concession, that during that particular Parliament our small group were never under any tremendous pressure to shut up or put to one side.

That is the one of the things with which I can credit that administration, that in their treatment of the Opposition, whether the Official Opposition or our group, there was never any tendency in any way, shape or form that was harsh or you might say devious in trying to force us out of having our say as long as we wanted to speak.

But in making this point I want to suggest that that may be an ideal for the Government and we need to hear from the Government just what plans it has with regard to rosters of speakers when agreement is reached as to a limit on debate. That is the most serious problem ahead of us under the new rules. In the minor parties—

Mr. Nesbitt: Would the hon. Member permit a question? Can we conclude from his remarks that he is suggesting as to the allocation of time for debate that if Government Members intend to take up half the time this rule would be used for the purpose of preventing Opposition backbenchers from speaking?

• (8:10 p.m.)

Mr. Fisher: I do not think it is for us either to suspect or not to suspect motives but I certainly think this will be the conclusion which many of us in the Opposition will reach.

Mr. Hahn: May I ask the hon. Member another question? I am trying to understand the proposition he is advocating. Do I understand him to suggest that backbench Members on this side of the House should have no right to speak on legislation whatever?

Mr. Fisher: Of course I am not suggesting that. The hon. Member knows very well I would not suggest that. What I am suggesting is that somewhere between the point of party discipline being exerted as it has been in the past and allowing 50 per cent of the time to go to Government Members we shall be adopting a tremendous change in our whole tradition of doing business here and handling legislation. It is obvious that we in the Opposition are not anxious to give up a prerogative which has been enshrined