

Abolition of Senate

● (1742)

I think now, when we are talking in terms of national unity, keeping our country together and upholding the regional aspirations of different sections of the land, it may be time for us, prior to any consideration of abolishing that institution, to consider amendments to the existing constitution, or changes in existing constitutional legislation which would have the effect of improving that institution, making it more responsive to the purpose for which it was first created, and in fact making the Senate of Canada a part of the over-all plan of helping the people in the different regions in Canada feel that they are participating in a Confederation worth saving. As the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) has already suggested, provision might be made to allow for participation by the provinces in the appointments to the Senate.

I say to the hon. member, when he makes the point that the Senate of Canada in fact has the official right to change legislation that comes from this House, that we should look seriously at changing those provisions by making it quite clear, through constitutional provision or otherwise, that the supreme body in the Parliament of Canada in respect of legislation should be, is, and will continue to be the House of Commons.

We should surely make it clear that, if there is a dispute between the two Houses, the decision taken ultimately by the House of Commons is the decision to be entered into the law, and that the position of the Senate is only an advisory position as opposed to a position carrying a constitutional right to hold up legislation that represents the will of the House of Commons.

The second point I wanted to make is that we may indeed have to look at the situation in terms of having a different method of appointing members to the Senate. I concur with the remarks and observations of the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre. I agree there are very strong and appropriate criticisms to be made of the Senate by virtue of its present composition and the use being made by the government of appointments to that place. I refer, of course, to the fact, and it is no secret, that the Liberal party and government are populating that particular chamber with their party organizers, bagmen, political advisers and others. Those people are now being supported by the Canadian taxpayer. I join with that hon. member in criticizing the particular way in which the Government of Canada has regarded the Senate, and that is with the same sort of contempt with which it regards this part of the Parliament of Canada, the House of Commons. I join with the hon. member in his criticism of this particular tendency of the government.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Scandalous!

M. Hnatyshyn: There may be ways in which to deal with that particular tendency. Whether we like it or not, the preponderance of government in the past 50 years has been that of the Liberal party. It has not taken upon itself to make sure that all areas and all points of view are represented. But it does make sure that all areas of the Liberal party are repre-

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

sented, and in this way brings the whole institution into disrespect.

It is my suggestion that we might consider an amendment or constitutional revision to limit the duration of a senator's tenure to possibly eight or ten years. In this way we would ensure a greater turnover, with more and differing points of view. An amendment should be made in such a way that the provinces might have more input in the appointments made to the Senate so that their points of view and perspectives could be brought to the Parliament of Canada in an unique way, strengthening our Confederation as opposed to weakening it. In that way the provinces would have a forum in which to discuss their points of view.

I do not wish to take much more time, because I know other members wish to speak. I simply make the point that whatever we say about the Senate, and we could talk for hours and hours about the relative merits, drawbacks, and even some of the abuses that have taken place, the fact of the matter is that the Senate is a legislative forum which would provide us with an opportunity, if we operate the institution properly by making sure appointments are based on reasonable and equitable rules, of having available to us in parliament the points of view of a wide variety of people who might not otherwise be involved in politics. It would give those people an opportunity to bring their expertise to parliament.

When we are considering this particular body one should realize that, while there may be abuses in respect of appointments, in other jurisdictions and in other countries political patronage often operates by way of appointments to the foreign service or important jobs within the public service.

I would ask this rhetorical question: are we not better off, aside from the question of abuses, in having failed politicians appointed to the other place, in that forum in which they can participate in debates, and in a setting in which they are more suited, rather than having them appointed to important public positions in which they could perhaps do a greater disservice to the country through incompetence or abuse? Are we not better off having them in a forum in which they can participate in debates, but in a place where they cannot by themselves cause a great deal of damage or cost the country an amount of money, such as might be the case were they put into positions holding great power?

Rather than populating our public service with failed politicians, or politicians who have not been successful, to put it more graciously, is there not some advantage in a continuation of the Senate?

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I thought I was unkind to the Senate, but what the hon. member is saying is a lot worse.

Mr. Hnatyshyn: I am not being unkind. I am trying to be as reasonable and equitable to that institution as possible.

I want to conclude by underlining my support for the hon. member's point of view in respect of the way in which the government has operated the Senate. I feel the hon. member