

Duration of Sittings

and, in short, there would be no free votes. In this kind of situation the government would be compelled to pay much greater attention to the views of this caucus and to ensure that those views were reflected in the legislation, if it were to be assured of passage.

Opposition influence would also increase because, if their arguments for change in legislation were to convince a number of government backbenchers, the legislation would again be in jeopardy. They would have to have very cogent arguments to convince all members in this House that their suggestions were better than those being put forth by the government in power. The government would have to pay some attention to opposition arguments, and the opposition, with a real chance to influence the course of events, would have to take greater pains to make their arguments responsible and convincing. Debate in the House would become more meaningful and less of a ritual.

The second reason for advocating a set term in parliament is very closely related to the one I have just mentioned, the fact that there would be no more free votes, and debates in the House would become more meaningful. Such a situation would mean that a debate was once again a drama. The outcome would no longer always be known in advance. Debate would once again be genuinely worth the attention of the news media.

It was mentioned earlier in the House that the news media is the fourth estate. I believe it was the hon. member for York North (Mr. Danson) who mentioned that over the years the opposition of the House has not been parties on the other side of the House, but that the opposition has been the press gallery, that they are the ones who have carried the arguments to the government, and any changes which have come about were because of the pressure which they have applied. If the opposition were truly interested in not only having a say but in changing the minds of the government, then their arguments should become more meaningful. In other words, news media coverage would serve to focus public attention upon developments in the House.

Just why this change is so important to the democratic process is somewhat difficult to explain, but let me take a stab at it. Parliament serves the purpose of focusing public attention upon matters of concern and of defining and delineating the considerations and the options involved. In so doing, parliament assists the public in coming to intelligent conclusions about the actions of government and helps individual members of the public to determine their own position on questions of import. The better media coverage, the more effective is this wholly desirable process. But beyond that, improved media coverage of improved parliamentary debate would mean a more rapid and more effective focusing of public opinion attention upon an issue, with the consequence that public opinion would more readily affect government actions.

Votes in the House are no longer the important control on the actions of the executive; rather, appeals by the opposition to the electorate are the important control. Even with a set-term parliament, this would remain the case. The only real

[Mr. Parent.]

sanction, the only real control on government action now is the prospect of defeat in the next election. With a majority government and the well established pattern of voting solidly by party—a pattern which a set-term parliament would soften but not end—votes are virtually meaningless and are useless as a means of effecting parliamentary control. Thus, what is important in the functioning of parliament is the quality of the discussion conducted, and that the discussion be focused. What is important in the functioning of parliament is that its discussions be heard by the public, and the news media attention would assure that they were.

When we go out on the hustings every four years, or, as in this case, five years, we wage election campaigns. The election campaigns in Britain, for example, are quite short. If my memory serves me correctly, they are three weeks. Here in Canada election campaigns stretch out as long as ten weeks. I submit that these campaigns are too long and too costly. They cost the Canadian taxpayer because contributions to political parties, which could run as high as \$25,000 to \$30,000, can be claimed as a tax deduction.

It is true that politicians by and large like to go from door to door talking to the people, like the handshakes at five o'clock in the morning at the plant gates, and like assisting at the candidates' night so they can stand up and spout off in every direction about the ills of the country. I suggest that what they do most of all at that candidates' night is to underscore their own biases, rather than what people on the street really believe, as the hon. member for Timiskaming said. Most people make up their minds within two weeks after the campaign is under way. Some people will vote for party, some for the leader, and some for the individual candidate. If we only had the right combination of what this means in terms of winning elections, probably all members in this House could sit here for as long as they chose.

The people of Canada are much more intelligent than just to accept a handshake and a smile. Notwithstanding the fact that we do have long campaigns, we would better serve our constituents if we were limited to a set period of three or four weeks in which there would be extensive campaigning consolidated in that time, so that in the end the election could be made without a drawn-out theatrical production.

I mentioned earlier the power that prime ministers and premiers have in calling an election. The question of whether it is the prime minister or the cabinet collectively which makes the substantive decision upon the timing of a general election seems to me to be of peripheral importance. The real issue, as I see it, is the extent to which the power to dissolve constitutes a major advantage for the government party vis-à-vis the opposition parties. It has been my intention, not to assert that no advantages accrue from such electoral discretion, but to try to demonstrate that the case of the proponents of the thesis of prime ministerial power in this particular instance is overstated and that it takes insufficient account of the ever-present constraints and limitations, and finally that there is too much based on the precedents of the 1950s and 1960s which have not subsequently proved as typical as was originally assumed.