

*Standing Orders*

I do not apologize for using the rules to express legitimate dissent when it comes to government legislation, policy, conduct, or to seek correction, generally of government misbehaviour, or to get time to say what is wrong with government legislation or to give to the public the time it needs to understand the implications of government proposals and to have its say about them. But what we have not done in this Parliament is simply to obstruct.

That is why I do not understand why the Government has chosen this time to act in a unilateral and arbitrary manner in an attempt to curtail even more the already severely limited devices by which the Opposition may act to hold the Government to account, to have some checks and balances in a system already strongly tilted toward the government of the day.

Early in this Parliament a special committee under the able chairmanship of the Hon. James McGrath took a long and, if I may say so, idealistic look at the way Parliament operates. The result was a comprehensive report recommending sweeping changes in our procedures. Some of us were skeptical about the value of every element, every part of the report. I confess that I was among the skeptics. Nevertheless, in what can only be described as a true leap of faith, we undertook to experiment with a new set of Standing Orders based on the report of the committee.

By and large those of us who were skeptics have really had our skepticism alleviated and softened because the rules, with some fine tuning here and there have, generally speaking, worked. We have now reached the stage where it makes sense to conclude the experiment and to give a final seal of approval to a generally sound system. Without question there is room for more fine tuning. But, I ask, is it not time to make these provisional Standing Orders permanent?

Insofar as fine tuning is concerned, the Standing Committee on Elections, Privileges and Procedure has taken a good look at the rules. As I have said, it made a useful, in fact an excellent, report in April on issues of some importance. I understand it is to make another report later this month on lesser issues.

I want to say that in this report the members of the committee did not find it necessary to recommend the changes the Government is trying to force through the House, in the motion before us, to Routine Proceedings or Government Notices of Motion. I submit that is the Government's real objective in the motion which we are debating today.

● (1250)

It was with a view to making the experimental rules permanent that the House Leaders of all Parties have been meeting for the last several weeks. We have discussed the rules in much detail and have reached the consensus, as the Government House Leader has reported, on a number of useful matters of a fine-tuning nature.

We agreed on some lesser changes about such things as the method of electing the Speaker, the taking of divisions, certain arrangements concerning Private Members' Business and

committees, the system of dealing with the business of supply, the form of petitions and other matters that have come to our attention either through the Standing Committee report or by becoming obvious in the day-to-day operation of the House.

When I left for my constituency late last Friday afternoon I felt reasonably confident that we had almost worked out, by consensus, arrangements satisfactory to all Parties whereby the experimental rules could be made permanent with more fine tuning to be done in the future. It was, therefore, a considerable surprise to me to learn that the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Mazankowski) had given notice late on Friday of the motion we now have before us. We in the official Opposition cannot support this motion as it now reads. We believe that changes to our rules ought to be made in a spirit of consensus and, therefore, ought not include matters to which one or more of the Parties cannot reconcile themselves.

It may be argued by government speakers that there have been exceptions to this, but I submit that they have been very rare and have dealt with situations which have accumulated over months and years and not because of the Government's pique or irritation about not having its way as quickly as it wanted with one Bill.

We certainly cannot support the Government's unilateral, inexplicable and indefensible encroachment upon one of the principles of parliamentary reform since 1982, that being the fixed parliamentary calendar. The Government has made no case at all for any departure from our practice of adjourning on fixed dates including the adjournment at the end of June until after Labour Day. It was this Government that decided last August to end the parliamentary session and take an extra month off, the month of September. We in the Official Opposition objected to that action at that time. Since then the Government has set the parliamentary agenda and cannot, on the basis of the record of legislation dealt with, make a case of Opposition obstruction.

If the Government has mismanaged—and it has—its own agenda, it should not attempt to blame the rules or the Opposition in an effort to repair self-inflicted damage. We do not see before us any legislation that is so pressing that the rules of the House have to be altered. We certainly oppose this part of the proposal.

We are not talking about a routine step which existed before the rule changes in 1982 whereby at the end of every period of the year, especially before adjournments in the summer and at Christmas, we negotiated on whether or not we were to sit for longer periods. The change the Government wants to make to enable the House, at the Government's will, to sit after the end of June is as much a change in the rules as is any other part of the motion.

If the Government can force through a change in the foundation of the rules with regard to the parliamentary calendar through this motion, what will be next? Will it be Question Period? Will it be having three readings on Bills? Is the Government really signaling to us that it wants to tear