

Senate Reform

The subject of Senate reform is almost as old as the nation itself. It has been in existence since shortly after we became a nation. It is interesting and ironic that we should be talking today about Senate reform when we look around this place and find, I suspect, that we ourselves are desperately in need of a little reform in this institution.

I would hesitate to draw to the attention of the House the fact that we may be operating with something less than a quorum, although there is a quorum within the environs of this Chamber. If there were to be a quorum called we would have a quorum very quickly.

The fact of the matter is that we are dealing with reforming the other House of our Parliament. When one sees the attendance here today, I suppose it is commensurate with the interest that there is here in that particular subject.

I am one who believes that the Senate can and does serve a very useful function. If we go back over the committees of the Senate, I can think of the Committee on Poverty which conducted an excellent study and brought in excellent recommendations under Senator Croll. I think of the Senate Committee on Aging, and the Committee on the Media. There are a number of Senate and standing committees of the Senate which do very good work on an ongoing basis. The problem is that no one knows what is going on there because no one pays any attention to it, least of all the press. I believe that is unfortunate.

We find ourselves in a position today where events have overtaken the Hon. Member's Bill. Only yesterday, the House agreed to a joint resolution for a Senate-House committee on the subject of Senate reform. It is interesting that that initiative came from the Senate, and it is to the credit of the Senate that it would include Members of the House of Commons on a joint committee. They did not have to proceed in that manner and could have carried on their study with their own committee, as we are indeed doing with our special committee on our rules. They felt, quite rightly and to their credit, that the elected representatives of the people should have some say in reforming the Senate of our Parliament.

To my knowledge there will be, for the first time, a Joint Committee on Senate reform. That is not to suggest that it has not been studied before. One only has to go to the Library of Parliament to see the reams and reams of paper from numerous studies over the past 70 years. I believe this is the first time, however, that it has been the subject of a joint committee of both Houses.

Having said that events have overtaken the Bill in terms of the joint resolution setting up the Joint Committee, I believe that we have to give that Committee an opportunity to do its work. We should not prematurely judge what our representatives on that Committee will put forward and whatever consensus they will arrive at with the representatives from the other place. Hence, one resists the temptation of putting forward one's own particular views on how one sees Senate reform.

I do believe that we will continue to require a Senate if our federation is to survive and prosper. How else can smaller Provinces be assured of an equal voice in the affairs of the

nation unless we have an upper House that tends to balance the disproportionate representation by population that we have in this, the elected Chamber?

It is interesting to note that that great democracy to the south of us only got around to having an elected Senate after the turn of the century. I stand to be corrected, but I believe it was around 1912 that the U.S. Senate became an elected House. Prior to that time I believe it was appointed by the States of the Union. Today, of course, it is not only an elected Senate but, in terms of the U.S. Congress, it is a very powerful Senate and one that has caused many problems in regard to the division of power within the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, an example of that is the Canada-U.S. Boundaries and Fisheries Agreement. That was an agreement that was painfully worked out between the Governments of Canada and the United States over a period of two years, only to be killed on the floor of the Senate by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. This gives some idea of the scope and the power which has grown in the elected Senate of the United States. Which should we have in Canada? Should we have an elected Senate? There is an argument to be made for that, and I tend to opt for it. Should we have a Senate of term appointments? Some suggest ten-year appointments. Members could certainly put forward arguments to support that thesis.

● (1520)

I certainly do not believe that the tenure right now is acceptable. I believe the life tenure, or what virtually amounts to a life tenure, retirement at 75 years of age, is not acceptable. Should we have appointments made solely by the Provinces? Should we have appointments made by the Provinces and the federal Government, or should we opt for an elected Senate? These are the questions which will be studied by the Joint Committee. I look forward to the report of that Committee. Perhaps it will generate a more lively debate than we have had in this place today.

Having said all that, I suspect that if we come back here in 25 or 50 years' time, we will still be talking about Senate reform. The point can be made and has to be made that there is a role in our federal system for the Senate. Whether it should take the form of an elected Senate, a term-appointed Senate, a life-appointed Senate, a Senate of regional representation, a Senate elected by some form of proportional representation or a combination of all these, are questions which seize the imagination. One can only hope that the Joint Committee will once and for all put the subject to rest. In any event, whatever evidence comes before the Joint Committee, I hope we will still have a bicameral legislature. If our country is to survive as a federal state, we have to have a bicameral legislature.

Mr. John Evans (Ottawa Centre): Mr. Speaker, in the time remaining I would like to make a few comments in the area of Senate reform. I agree with the Hon. Member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) that there should be a bicameral system in Canada. I disagree strongly with the position of the New