

*Government Orders*

The shortened calendar though will not impede the government from enacting its agenda because a government which has invoked closure after only seven hours of debate on an issue as sensitive as the GST will find 135 days sufficient to ram through the legislation it wants to pass.

The argument appears to be that for reasons of efficiency, we need to restrict the opportunities of members to bring forward the considerations and concerns of their constituents.

We are going to increase by 25 per cent the time spent each day passing government motions and bills, but we are going to reduce the number of days spent debating the budget, the throne speech and opposition motions. We are going to reduce the number of committee meetings by requiring several committees to share two committee rooms. We are going to restrict the testimony before legislative committees to purely technical matters. The government is going to facilitate the use of closure and time allocation limits on debate, cut the length of most speeches to 10 minutes and remove the right to vote on certain stages of bills.

In the name of efficiency, these are the sorts of measures that the government is tabling and proposing to restrict the activities of members in the legitimate pursuit of bringing forward the concerns of their constituents.

In fact, the government will be able to avoid sitting for all but a few days. Currently, the House must sit for 25 days a year before the government can get approval for money for operations, in other words, for supply. In order for the supply to be triggered, these 25 House sitting days must be scheduled. But under the Conservative government's proposal, the government will be able to reduce the number of supply days when it shuts the House down and passes an appropriation act with only a few days sitting.

If the government does not get its own way through all of these restrictions on the activities of the members, the government has invented or presented us with an ultimate escape clause, a rule that lets it invent new rules.

Last year, we will all remember, whatever our position might have been on the constitutional question, that Elijah Harper, a member of the legislature in Manitoba, showed Canadians how powerful a single elected mem-

ber can be on certain occasions when unanimous consent is required. Mr. Harper could not block or defeat the Meech Lake Accord, which he and which most Canadians were so opposed to, because our system ensures that the will of the majority prevails, but he could refuse to let the Manitoba legislature suspend the rules agreed upon by all of them and he denied unanimous consent to waive notice before the debate began.

Unanimous consent, both given and withheld, as we all know, is a crucial check in the balance of power between a government and its legislature. Yet, almost daily, the House of Commons agrees, by unanimous consent, to set aside regulatory procedures, to speed Routine Proceedings or to reach an agreed decision. This flexibility ensures that limits on which there is a consensus are treated differently than truly opposed issues.

No individual member can stop the will of the majority, but our parliamentary procedures guarantee that any one member can prevent abuse of the process. The government wants to change this. It wants to redefine unanimous consent. Unanimous consent now will mean at least 25 people. In other words, 25 members of Parliament must be present to block government proposals to change the rules and arrange government business in a way it sees fit. If fewer than 25 members get to their feet to oppose, these motions will be adopted without debate and no member could even utter a word of opposition.

With such a rule in place, the government, at appropriate times, could pass certain bills or even constitutional procedures, establish or abolish committees or get parliamentary approval to controversial government appointments. In other words, it would be able to short-circuit the entire legislative process. I think there are reasons why it is appropriate for the opposition to delay the process of government business. Although the government dislikes that and finds it frustrating, nevertheless it is appropriate in certain circumstances for the opposition to give the public the opportunity to consider the government's measures fully, to fully understand the issues and give them an opportunity to mobilize their opposition if that seems appropriate.

It is appropriate that the opposition have the opportunity to from time to time use whatever procedural measures are there to delay the government's business, not just to be a nuisance, but in order that the public can