

Report of Special Committee

Mr. Terry Sargeant (Selkirk-Interlake): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to rise today and speak in support of this motion moved by the Hon. Member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker). Given that it is the wish of the Members on this side of the House to pursue this report, and indeed all seven reports, as expeditiously as possible with little or no debate, I will make my comments very brief.

First, I would like to second the comments made by the Hon. Member for Nepean-Carleton in his expression of thanks to the staff members who worked very, very hard and did a very good job in the year and a half life of the special committee. I must say I joined this committee rather late in its life. I became part of it in the winter, in February of this year. In some ways it was like arriving at a party late in the evening to find that everyone else was well into enjoying the evening's events and it was rather impossible to catch up. However, it was quite an experience for me. I was quickly impressed by the special dynamics of this committee in that Members of all three parties in the House worked together and worked together very well. It was said this afternoon and also in debate on the third report some months ago, that we set aside partisan differences for the common goal, the common goal being to make this House work better, indeed, to make the House more relevant to the Canadian public. We cannot easily ignore the recent Gallup poll which indicated that almost two-thirds of Canadians are not too sure of the relevance of this House of Commons.

There was no doubt the committee worked long and hard. I think the results are excellent. The results have been accepted and were well received by the public, at least the public that is aware of what we are doing, and it has been well received by Members of the House on all sides. Notably, I think the results have been well received by observers of the House of Commons, the professional media who work here, academics, business groups and indeed any number of groups who are concerned with how the House of Commons works.

I think it was a remarkable day last fall when the House of Commons accepted the third report through which it was accepted that the House try out the recommendations in that report for a one-year period. From my observation, this trial period has been well received and received positively by the Members of the House. I admit there is some room for some fine tuning of the changes under which we have been operating during the last year, but I doubt very much whether we would find very much call in this House to return to the rules that were in effect before the beginning of this year.

Having said that, and recognizing that the Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedures has tabled seven more reports, all of which, as has been pointed out by my friend, the Hon. Member for Nepean-Carleton, were adopted unanimously without there ever having been a vote in committee and all of which were designed to improve the operations of this House, I must say I am somewhat disappointed that the House has yet to adopt these reports. I am disappointed and somewhat surprised at the reaction of the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) today. He has said he is indeed committed

to reform of the House of Commons, and yet he asked why we want to bring in our recommendations so quickly. I think a number of us on the committee have some very particular fears that all of the work we did over the last year and a half, which included dozens and dozens of meetings and dozens and dozens of testimonials and presentations by witnesses, a lot of work by Members of the House, a lot of work by staff people, might all go for naught. How will the public view us, Mr. Speaker, if all of this work and all of the attendant costs for this work, were thrown into the dustbin? I think we might find that more than 64 per cent will view us as being irrelevant.

• (1250)

The President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) asked why the Opposition was concerned with getting agreement on the remaining seven reports so quickly. If he believes that we need parliamentary reform, and given that the reports have been tabled, does it not make sense to bring them in as soon as possible? Does it not make sense to reform this institution as soon as we can and carry on from there? The sooner we have a better House of Commons in which to operate, the better it is for this place and for the people of Canada.

He also said that the Government wanted to look at all these reports in the general context of the operations of the House of Commons. Does he not think that the committee did that? Does he not think that the committee looked at these changes in the over-all context of the operations of Parliament? I remind him that the majority of members on that committee were Members of the Government Party. They agreed with Members of the Opposition Parties that these changes were for the good of Parliament. They viewed them in the general context of the operations of the House of Commons.

Speaking specifically to the fifth report, I do not think there is much call for debate. The Hon. Member for Nepean-Carleton in introducing it pointed out that it stemmed from some of the specific recommendations of the third report. In particular, it allows for independent references to committee by four members of the committee. I cannot see that there would be any argument in the House of Commons. Just to repeat myself, it was agreed to by all members of the committee. It is a simple, straightforward proposition. I cannot see any opposition to its approval today.

I really do not have much more to say. I think the reports should be accepted as soon as possible. For my part and on behalf of my Party, we would be more than willing to adopt the remaining seven reports very quickly with little or even no debate. We believe that this place needs to be reformed. We believe in the reports tabled by the Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedure. Having said that, I urge the House to adopt the fifth report today. Also I urge it to adopt very soon the remaining reports which have yet to be looked at.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Blaker): Questions, comments? Debate.

Mr. John Evans (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, the issue before us today