

Standing Orders

We hope the Government will see fit to negotiate a final conclusion to this particular stalemate in reforming the rules, regulations and traditions of the House of Commons.

● (1540)

Mr. Robinson: Madam Speaker, I appreciated hearing my distinguished colleague's remarks with respect to the proposed changes to the Standing Orders. I have a couple of questions I would like to put to him and I would like to ask him to elaborate on a few of the points he made. Let us face it, Madam Speaker, those Canadians who are watching this particular debate with respect to the Standing Orders are not sitting on the edges of their seats gripped with excitement at the contents of the debate. Yet I think it is important that members of the public understand clearly the implications of these proposals by the Government on this important institution of Parliament.

With that in mind, I would ask the Hon. House Leader for my Party to tell us whether, to the best of his recollection, there has been any time since he was elected, and I believe he was elected in 1980, that any Government, whether the former Liberal Government, the former Conservative Government or this Government, has made any attempt to use this kind of heavy-handed process to impose changes to the Standing Orders on the House of Commons.

I think it is important that Canadians understand clearly the history of this place and that these kinds of changes to the Standing Orders which govern this House are traditionally made by way of discussion, consensus, agreement and give and take. I would like the Hon. House Leader to indicate the history of this particular matter with respect to the imposition of changes in the Standing Orders of the House of Commons.

Perhaps the Hon. Member could also indicate why it was that this Parliament in fact moved to a fixed parliamentary calendar. He will recall, as I certainly do, the days not that long ago when Members of Parliament never knew from one day to the next or from one week to the next when the House would adjourn. He will know of the particular burdens that placed on Members of Parliament who were attempting to have some sense of their own personal agendas, which, obviously, is of some importance as well.

I would ask the Hon. House Leader to amplify on those two particular concerns, first, with respect to the way in which the Government is seeking to change the Standing Orders of this House and, second, why he has placed, quite properly in my view, such importance on the changes with respect to the fixed parliamentary calendar.

Mr. Riis: I thank my hon. friend from Burnaby for those various questions. I will answer them in order as best I can. First, the decision to extend the hours of Parliament into the summer, in my opinion, is a reflection of the inability of the Government to do its business. It has the largest majority in the history of Canada. One would think that if there was any Government which could do its business in the time prescribed,

it ought to be this Government. Presumably that is not the case.

Any effective individual, family, business, farm, fisherman, and so on, who wants to conduct his or her affairs in the most positive way must do it with some ability to plan ahead. It was in that spirit that Members of the House of Commons from all Parties agreed that it was in the best interests of us all to know when the session ended and when it began. From that came a calendar year so that we could all plan our lives in order to be the most effective and efficient Members of Parliament possible. We might now see that changed.

The second question was with respect to the process. I have only been a Member of Parliament for seven plus years, but in that time I have seen the tremendous interest of all Members in parliamentary reform. The very prestigious McGrath committee spent a great amount of time, reflecting the views of all political Parties, on what it felt were appropriate changes to the parliamentary rules and regulations. We also had the appropriate standing committee headed by the distinguished Chairman, the Hon. Member for Peace River (Mr. Cooper). Working with his colleagues from all political Parties he came up with some extremely thoughtful recommendations in terms of what was felt should be changes to the rules and regulations of Parliament. All of us have felt comfortable with that process and supportive because we knew the quality of the members of the committee and of their commitment to parliamentary reform. When they made their recommendations, it was with very little debate that the House of Commons supported the principle of the changes they proposed.

It is for that reason that the frustration exists as it does today. After all of that work for all those years by so many Members of the House of Commons, we arrive at the point where we find on the Order Paper that the Government has taken unilateral action while negotiations, I might say, were in process. In fact, we were so close to completing the negotiations, that the House Leader for the Government even suggested we extend the deadline we set for ourselves twice so we could complete the negotiations. We all left last week feeling that we had finally reached the end. We felt satisfied that there had been give and take on both sides. That is why there is such a high level of frustration today.

I suspect that if Members of the House were reflecting their views as they actually feel them and reflecting their feelings as they actually see them, they too would feel a certain element of frustration that the process, I would say, nearly broke down, when there was still optimism and hope that the process would be completed to everyone's satisfaction.

Mr. Belsher: Mr. Speaker, The Hon. Member has suggested that the process of Parliament has broken down. The process has not broken down at all, Madam Speaker, but is really functioning the way it is supposed to function. The Hon. Member also made much of the fact that the Government has an enormous number of members and in that way can force through any type of legislation. I think what he has failed to