

British North America Act

with me to that extent will say that perhaps the answer to that is to have an elected body as a second chamber. I have seen nothing to that effect in any of the suggestions that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has made, but I want to register my objection to that idea. I think we have enough stresses and strains in Canada already, when you consider the pulls there are between the federal and provincial governments and the stresses that exist between the federal executive and federal parliament. If we added to that a second chamber that had moral authority, we would just slow down the process of government in this country almost to a standstill. I do not think that that is the direction in which to proceed.

It is sometimes argued that we should not do away with the other place because it is a bulwark and a defence of the rights of minorities. That is a myth. In fact, no one stated that more forcefully than my friend, Senator Forsey, in a paper he wrote on the Senate some years ago. He said that in fact it was the most undemocratic institution in the world. On the question of the minority rights, he said that that was a myth. Minority rights are protected by the courts, by the House of Commons, and by the representation from the various provinces here in this House.

The other place is one of those institutions that we have had around and many people accept it because they cherish the thought that they might get there some day. To me that would be a fate worse than death. But just because we have had it all this time is no reason it should continue. I think what this House ought to do is to pass this bill, send it to the appropriate committee and let us study seriously the whole question of abolishing what we now call the other place or the upper house.

Some individuals may ask: have we the right to do it? The Senate is provided for in the BNA Act. We have amended the provisions respecting the Senate by bills that have been put through both houses of parliament. We amended it with respect to the age at which senators must retire, and if the Prime Minister is planning reform of the Senate, he will have to do it by a bill. I know, of course, that a bill could be passed by this House and that if Their Honours did not pass it, it would not become law. However, if this House did that a couple of times and the Senate overrode the wish of the elected people, it would not be long before they would see the light.

Upper chambers have been abolished in a number of provinces. In my province of Manitoba it was abolished way back in the 1870s. Nova Scotia abolished its upper house, and Quebec did so not long ago. Other countries have done it as well. I think that the sensible, realistic thing to do is for us to get rid of a chamber which really is completely outside the democratic process. I repeat my expressions of respect for many of the individuals over there, for the work that they do and for their conscientiousness. That is not the issue. The issue is whether there is a place in an elected parliamentary democracy for 102 individuals enjoying all the rights, privileges and authorities accorded to them, without any responsibility back to anyone at all.

So despite the number of times that my motions and my bills for the abolition of the Senate have been unsuccessful, I hope that this time, now that the issue of Senate

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

reform has been raised by the Prime Minister himself, the House will agree to give this Bill second reading and let it go to the appropriate standing committee for thorough consideration.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Fox (Argenteuil-Deux-Montagnes): Mr. Speaker, I have listened most attentively to the argument put forward by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) concerning this matter which was brought on many occasions to the attention of the House by the hon. member who certainly pleaded his case with considerable eloquence. This being said, Mr. Speaker, I am sometimes under the impression that the only way the hon. member could have his dream—which may have reached the stage of a darling dream—come true would be for him to accept at one time or another an appointment to the Senate, in order better to convince his new colleagues of the necessity to put an end to their own institution.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Never!

Mr. Fox: I hear the hon. member say that he will never accept such an appointment. I suggest that it is because this would hurt his true democratic convictions which are held in high esteem by all hon. members.

While listening to him, Mr. Speaker, I suddenly remembered this saying by John Stewart Mills:

[English]

On all great subjects much remains to be said.

[Translation]

I do not know, Mr. Speaker, if this saying applies to the matter considered here and which has been studied several times during private members' business period in previous sessions. But the Senate is part of our political institutions and as such deserves to be considered by all those concerned with the continuous betterment of the Canadian democratic process.

The question of the Senate does not trigger any passionate controversy outside the House. I would even suggest that very few Canadians in a whole year care to listen to the debates of the Senate, even if quite relevant questions are sometimes discussed there. "Prologues Without a Play", said Walter Bagehot in his classic on the English constitution, referring to debates of some legislative bodies.

Mr. Speaker, I do not want my remarks to lead to confusion. I recognize wholeheartedly the presence in the Senate of distinguished Canadians. There are men and women who worked in all public and private sectors in Canada, men and women still making valuable contribution to community life in Canada. But their distinction is quite independent of their role as senators. Their contribution to the community precedes their appointment as senators.

Mr. Speaker, although the Senate once played a real part in Canada, serious doubt exists whether it still does today.

In a democracy, power should be exercised by representatives of the people. Such is the case in Canada today. Every time however we vote a piece of legislation in this House, the Senate goes through the unbelievable masquerade of going over it.