

Committee to Consider Business of House

The first duty of parliament is to remain a parliament, not to become a subservient and ornamental body. Parliament has a right which is certainly paramount to the convenience of the prime minister, the right to live. It has the duty to defend itself and not to allow anybody to invade its rights and privileges. It is the will of parliament, not that of the government, that is the will of the nation.

In the same year a former prime minister, Mr. Mackenzie King, made the following statement in reference to the imposition of closure:

I want to make it perfectly clear, Mr. Speaker, that the battle which has been put up in connection with this measure is not merely over the rights of minorities or the rights of majorities; it is true that it has to do with the rights of both; rights, which in the case of the majority no less than in that of the minority are threatened—

The committee, representing this House of Commons, will make its recommendations. I believe that the closure rule is no longer necessary. Its original purpose was to terminate excessive debate or systematic obstruction. Where there has been obstruction in this house, however far it has been carried, I have taken the stand that under no circumstances should the motion for closure be made. I believe that the experience of a few years ago has assured that never again will closure be applied in this House of Commons. I hope that the fullest consideration will be given to this question by the committee when established.

The use of closure arose by reason of the terrific obstruction that occurred in the British House of Commons during the days of the home rule debate. It came to Canada in 1913 under the government of Sir Robert Borden. It was used on three or four occasions, the last of which was in 1956 under the government of Right Hon. Louis St. Laurent. As long as our rules provide for the use of closure it can be misused. On the basis of the experience of the past I feel we should give the fullest consideration to this because governments, whatever their political stripe, with the closure rule at hand have an invitation to do the things that the rules permit.

I shall say no more. I have endeavoured to speak objectively without going into detail and without citing the unhappy experiences of the past with regard to the use of closure. I shall refrain from saying more, because I feel this matter will be dealt with objectively by the all party committee when it is set up. Your Honour will head that committee. I urge the establishment of the committee and trust that on the basis of the experience of the past and the knowledge of the committee it will bring in an early report and recommendation to the house.

[Mr. Diefenbaker.]

Hon. J. W. Pickersgill (Bonavista-Twillin-gate): Mr. Speaker, I am glad the Prime Minister reminded me of something I might otherwise not have remembered this early in the day, and that is that although today is a Monday, and he was elected to parliament on a Tuesday, this in the 22nd anniversary of his election to parliament. In view of the shadows which events have cast before them the Prime Minister will appreciate my being somewhat measured in my expression of congratulation, but I will say that the parliament of Canada would have been a very different place if the right hon. gentleman had not been elected 22 years ago.

It is perhaps not the role for which I am most notorious in the house, but I cannot forbear to congratulate the Prime Minister on something else, namely the tone and temper of his speech today in moving this motion. I am afraid the Prime Minister will have disappointed the press, whose advance notices of his speech were somewhat more lurid than the fact justified. However, in this instance I think the Prime Minister has been wiser than those who sought in advance to forecast what he would do.

Mr. Diefenbaker: I could be provoked.

Mr. Pickersgill: The right hon. gentleman almost seems to be inviting me, Mr. Speaker. I can assure him that at the present time I would be extremely chary about responding to his invitation in the affirmative. The Prime Minister talked about the need to be expeditious—and the motion also mentions the matter—in the conduct of our business, consistent with proper debate of public issues. I must say that, having regard to the temper and tone of the house at the present moment, I think no one would quarrel with that at all. If the debate continues in the way in which it has begun I think there will be no need for any prolonged discussion on this motion at all. From the main part of the motion we on this side of the house have no dissent whatsoever. Perhaps I might just refer to the words:

That a select committee, to be designated, be appointed to consider with Mr. Speaker the procedure of this house for the purpose of suggesting any changes that may be desirable to assure the more expeditious dispatch of public business—

That is the main part of the motion. The next phrase, on which I will say a word or two in a moment, is of course merely a subsidiary feature of the main motion. I think we are all agreed with the main motion, particularly after the experience of the session of parliament of 1961. In the light of the private circumstances of many hon. members I think all of us feel that if, by co-operation between the two sides of the house with