

Motion Respecting House Vote

myself. These are the kinds of thoughts I had in mind earlier today to give to the house, before the Minister of Justice provoked us as he did before the supper recess. I repeat, however, that this is a terribly serious thing we are doing. We are not just passing one simple motion in the month of February, 1968: We are amending the constitution of Canada; we are changing the way in which this parliament works. Yes, we should make changes, and I think we should take into account the minority situation. We should take into account ways and means of staying here and doing the business of the country. But we should not support a device that enables the government to twist our words and enables it to use a new rule after it has lost out on the first one, to bring back something that has been defeated by the House of Commons.

I see that my time is just about up, Mr. Speaker, and that means the other thing I wanted to say I shall have to compress into a couple of minutes. Perhaps it is not related to what I have been saying, and I have no doubt that I may be accused of acting like a school teacher lecturing his pupils. I am going to take that chance, and there is another chance I am going to take, too. I hope that the experience of last Monday night, February 19, and the experience of the days that have gone by since, have made us realize the importance of attendance in the House of Commons. This whole sorry mess which we have had these last eight or nine days would not have happened at all if two or three more Liberal members had been present on February 19. When people like the Minister of Justice stand up and complain about the eight days—by the way, this motion has been under debate only three days—that have been taken, let the government members recall that the whole reason for this mess lies in the fact they did not have their people here. I will go further than that now, and say that I hope we all realize that, after all, attendance in this House of Commons is important.

Mr. Nielsen: Why? A vote does not mean anything.

Mr. Knowles: My hon. friend says the rule does not mean anything.

Mr. Nielsen: No, a vote does not mean anything, so why be here?

Mr. Knowles: I am sorry I misunderstand, for I know the hon. member was paying attention to my previous remarks in which I

contended that we should have the kind of rules which will make votes mean something. I think it is quite clear that we would not have had this mess if attendance in the House of Commons were taken more seriously. If I may indulge in a bit of a commercial, on Sunday night the hon. member for Medicine Hat (Mr. Olson), the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) and I had the privilege of being on one of the C.B.C.'s open line programs called "Cross Country Check-up". We were asked to discuss parliamentary procedure, in the hope that we would get questions that would pry into our academic knowledge of these things. We did not get very many questions of that general kind. They all dealt with last week's crisis. However, although I did not keep exact count, I know I am safe in saying that at least three out of five of the questions—they came by long distance from all over Canada—were identical: Why weren't the members here?

An hon. Member: They were not all in Jamaica.

Mr. Knowles: I realize I am getting support from my Conservative friends, and that they are ricocheting these remarks across to the Liberals. However, I am directing my remarks to the whole house. The fact is that we had only 166 members in the House of Commons last Monday night, out of 265. This is not to our credit. I hope, as a result of this experience, we will realize that it is our job to be here. I agree with the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) that we must make a change in our practice which will make it meaningful to be here. We can increase the importance of our being here if we make the kind of changes that will make it possible for all parties and all members to participate in debate, and will make all votes really significant.

Mr. Speaker, I deplore the way in which things have been twisted by the other side. With the rest of my colleagues, I say we should defeat this motion that is now before us, because in effect it is a motion that would open the door to bringing back taxes against which we are strongly opposed. I am opposed to it also because I think the passing of this motion opens the door to constitutional changes, in fact makes constitutional changes, that would not be for the benefit of parliament. On the other hand, if we study our problems and look at the things we can do, I think we can make changes that will make our parliamentary procedures even better. This I hope we will do very soon.