

Supply

As soon as the estimates were passed after the Christmas recess, I proposed to the House leaders a procedure for dealing with the matter of reform, and then there were discussions. I suggested a specific formula to deal with the issue, since the matter of supply had by then been settled, the legislation backlog resulting from holding two elections in less than a year had for the most part been dealt with and we had tabled our budget, the dust had settled and the atmosphere was more favourable to the consensus needed for procedural changes. So, as soon as we came back from the Christmas recess I proposed to the House leaders a way of dealing with the matter of reform, but our discussions were interrupted by the bells.

This is where matters stand. What I would like to explore today, as a possible avenue to practical, positive changes within the best possible time frame, is this: the Leader of the Opposition is asking us to send a general reference to the committee, and I will consider this.

● (1620)

Keeping in mind the circumstances I have related, the urgency of making changes and the fact that some changes have already been closely scrutinized and recommended to the House and could be implemented without reference to a committee, I would be more inclined to test the good faith of the opposition and consider the advisability of going ahead with some of those changes at the earliest opportunity. That could be done without any reference to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization and without at the same time asking the committee, which is the appropriate forum to study changes and the whole question of parliamentary reform, to consider the document tabled by the Progressive Conservative Party when they were in office, a document which contains a few useful suggestions but which is not exhaustive by any means, namely the Lambert report, the Economic Council of Canada studies and the Peterson report on regulations. All those documents ought to be carefully reviewed and a detailed report by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization should come out in due time. What I am saying, however, is that the way to go about it would be to find out whether the Leader of the Opposition is truly sincere and whether the members of the Progressive Conservative Party want reform and changes.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, the tradition-based parliamentary procedure to make changes in the House is to have the changes examined by the House committee which deals with such matters, the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization. In 1976—and that had begun in 1975 if I am not mistaken—that committee sat and travelled during several months and it went to London. It was chaired by the then government House leader, the Hon. Mitchell Sharp, and included the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker)—it was Grenville-Carleton then—the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) and the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. MacGuigan) to name a few, and I was also on that committee along with a number of other members who are here in the House, including the hon. member for Rosemont (Mr. Lachance) who will have an opportunity to give us his views later on today. That committee

spent several months considering the general concept of parliamentary reform and was indeed able to produce quite an exhaustive report.

I am ready to test the good faith of the opposition by making the following suggestion. Let us continue the House leaders negotiations on the subject, let us select those changes in the report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization which have undergone the parliamentary test of analysis by the committee members and let us implement them practically overnight and refer the rest to the committee. The changes which might thus be considered in the negotiations I will be having with the other parliamentary House leaders in the immediate future in the hope of reaching agreement very quickly could include 20-minute speeches. That was one of the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, and I refer to page 20:55 of that report. Twenty-minute speeches have been advocated since 1976. It is the subject of proposal No. 41 of the Progressive Conservative document and there is absolutely no reason why we could not immediately set a time limit on speeches.

I recall quite vividly that last year during a debate on parliamentary procedure I challenged the Leader of the Official Opposition to implement forthwith the 20-minute limit on speeches, but at the time he did not have the courage to take up the challenge. Today I am making the same suggestion to him and if he wants 20-minute speeches we are quite prepared to go ahead with that suggestion right now. However, I am convinced that they are not prepared to agree to anything today, but still I want to continue my efforts to seek the required consensus at least to make those changes which are of a non-controversial nature.

Another non-controversial change which does not settle the whole question of parliamentary reform but would be a token of good faith would be to proceed with all the votes at a given time. Mr. Speaker, Parliament has 282 members and a \$75 billion annual budget to manage, and here we are running along corridors like school children called by bells which more often than not ring too long. It seems to me it would be normal. In much smaller companies where decisions are made about much smaller amounts of money and where those decisions have far less impact, the directors are tactfully advised in advance of upcoming voting meetings so as to be able to arrange their schedule and plan for those decision-making meetings.

Consequently, if the opposition is sincere, it should have no objection to defer all the votes to a given time. This way, the members would know in advance when a vote would take place. There will be no more hide-and-seek games to try to catch somebody off guard, no need to call back members away on official trips, no attempt to break the traditional parliamentary rule of pairing or to take the government by surprise. These are childish games, and I think they explain, among other reasons, why the people are cynical toward us. In my opinion, it would be normal for us to determine the time of the votes. It would prevent a recurrence of the shameful incident which occurred lately. On page 2067 of the committee report I