

*Government Orders*

One must conclude from the absence of speakers on the government side today that even backbenchers of the governing party find it extremely difficult to defend this package. Not one has risen today in defence of this proposal. We are witnessing a profound lack of confidence on the part of the benches on the government side. That says more than anything else.

In all fairness, one has to say by way of a general comment that the government's package does contain a number of potentially helpful proposals and most of them, I submit to you, flow from existing practices. It would be building on existing practices that would lead to some of the changes that we have supported by way of an intervention made a couple of days ago by the Whip of the Official Opposition in this House.

The positive side of this package is poisoned by the over-all thrust of the suggested new timetable, which prevents the opposition from holding the government accountable in the manner that it ought to be in a modern parliamentary system.

As we have heard from other speakers, it is being proposed that we reduce by one-quarter the number of sitting days. This may appear to the average Canadian to be a matter of debatable significance, if we were not to add very quickly the fact that by reducing from some 175 to 135 the number of sitting days, Canadians, through the media and other channels, are denied the information that is generated through Question Period and the scrums following Question Period. We all know from experience that it is through that process of daily questions and answers that an assessment is made of government decisions, programs and intentions that relate to the public interest.

In that respect, therefore, a reduction by one-quarter of the number of sitting days is more than just a statistic, it is more than just a general number; it has a significance that, once translated into political terms, assumes a certain importance.

This leads me to comment also on the fact that this reduction in sitting days in the House of Commons seems to be motivated by an over-all attitude to the parliamentary democratic process which is rather stringent, discipline-oriented and, at times, I regret to say, rather repressive. I do not want to sound like a professional opposition member because we think that we will be, with the support of the Canadian voter, replacing the government. Therefore, we have to make speeches,

keeping in mind the importance of governing in a parliamentary system.

But I would like to draw to the attention of the House that in the life of this Parliament, namely since the November 1988 election, the time allocation motions, in other words, motions of a kind that have restricted or placed a limit to debate in this House, have been invoked eight times. The number of times in which closure—which is really a guillotine—on debate has been invoked nine times, Mr. Speaker.

These numbers have significance if they are compared to a benchmark. I would like to draw the attention of the House to the fact that in the Trudeau government years—the last major change in parliamentary rules that I can recall before the McGrath commission—between 1970–71 to 1984, closure was invoked three times over a period of 14 years. Here, by contrast, closure has been invoked nine times over a period of nine years. Do we not detect a pattern of management of Parliament that is pretty severe and pretty restrictive in resorting to such extreme measures?

The question, of course, is why? It is a subject that we could perhaps debate on another occasion in analysing why closure has been invoked nine times in two years.

• (1520)

Evidently it is the nature of the measures this government has imposed on Canadians through Parliament that has made this type of strategy frequently necessary; namely, the resorting to closure. I submit that this is very regrettable.

The reduction of sitting days also means that Parliament is no longer being seen as the place where political leadership on the part of all the parties involved ought to be expressed, particularly in difficult times of the kind we are experiencing and witnessing today. We seem to be led by a notion, expressed through this package by the government, that Parliament is really not a place where credible thoughts can be expressed, where politicians have a role to play, and where the intellectual capacity of the elected members can come to the fore in a thoughtful and constructive approach to the issues of our times.

The message is in reverse and says that the number of sittings should be reduced and the members should be sent home and be kept away because, in the opinion of this government, Parliament is somehow becoming less and less relevant. That is at a time when Canadians obviously look for leadership from their politically