

Transport and Communications

minor issue. This is something very significant. I am suggesting here as a Member of Parliament from Gander-Twillingate in Newfoundland that the railway in question is not really the important issue this evening. I am saying that even though there is a danger of losing the railway in our province, the only passenger service in the whole island, this is not nearly as important as the fact that the future of the committee system in this house is in danger. As things are, the whole structure will, in my opinion, come to nought if the proposal put forward by the leader of the house or by the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, whichever is accepted, is allowed to pass.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Lundrigan: I am one of the members who came here last fall. I almost accepted the philosophical position taken by the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) during and subsequent to the election when he talked about the democratization of parliament, about participatory democracy or some such animal—a great phrase, but we don't know what it means back in Newfoundland. There was a great statement about involvement, about all hon. members becoming involved in the legislative process, including all those who sit on the Liberal back benches. The could help to shape legislation, so it was said, by attending the committees, bringing in amendments, pressing their points of view, moving motions and then having them brought before the House of Commons. We were all enthralled by this idea of an efficient parliament and a great committee system.

I accepted this point of view to some extent. I thought: I am a new member and this sounds good to me. I almost fell for the arguments which were put forward. Then I had occasion to experience exactly what took place in those committees, events leading to the shame with which we are faced today. Some hon. members may be wondering why I am upset about this. Well, the people of Canada thought that because of the changes made in the rules the committee system would become so effective that even Thomas More would have felt his Utopia left nothing to be achieved in this House of Commons. I took part in the committee system feeling we had a means by which all members regardless of political affiliations would have the opportunity of making a contribution to the legislative process. But this, I learned in a hurry, was a false assumption on my part.

I ask your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, to mention an incident which took place in the Fisheries Committee. We sat on that committee for ten hours on two separate days trying every procedure we knew in an attempt to bring in certain basic amendments. It was a complete waste of time. This was before the television broadcast involving the hon. member for York East (Mr. Otto). Eventually, I walked out of that committee. I remember saying: gentlemen, this is it, for me. I am walking out. It is a waste of time. The people of Gander-Twillingate did not elect me to come here and waste my time debating hopeless issues.

This action of mine in walking out of the committee was regarded by some members as something not altogether manly; I was not playing the game. A couple of days later the hon. member for York East (Mr. Otto) was said at least by other members of the house to have disclosed, in the course of a television program, that government members on the various committees had been instructed not to accept any amendments proposed by the opposition but to vote against them en bloc, thereby destroying the whole idea of the committee system.

That is what concerns us tonight. We are not talking only about the Budget. We are talking about the whole committee system of the House of Commons. The chairman of this particular committee has been in the house for 20 years. He has the great respect of all members of the House of Commons. This chairman, after presiding over a well-informed committee, made a recommendation. Yet the leader of the house says it has no place on the floor of the Commons.

The President of the Privy Council (Mr. Macdonald) had many avenues open to him. Here are some of the things he could have done. First, he could have instructed all his back benches on the various committees to vote against any move which would result in anything being done to cause embarrassment to the government. In other words, he could have instructed his members to play no role in the legislative process of this country. I submit that this has actually been done, or else one of the members of the Liberal party has broken faith with that party.

● (8:10 p.m.)

In the event there were unpopular presentations or amendments made, the second avenue open was to refuse to bring these into the house. At the present time we have before us