

Private Members' Business

Therefore I believe I have established that a relaxation of the confidence convention and freer voting has been the subject of study and positive recommendations of at least two parliamentary committees, many members of which are still sitting in the House today. As well we know of at least one other jurisdiction where what would be the results of my motion has been put into action with no dire consequences. Responsible government still prevails, political parties still exist—they have not been deemed obsolete—and most important of all, the public through its members in the House of Commons has some real influence over the policy making process.

I would like to address some of the criticisms that have been levied against relaxation of the confidence convention and freer voting in the House. It is argued that freer voting would have a negative effect on the future well-being of political parties. Political parties are vitally important to the system, especially at election time, for the development of policy and the support the leader can give individual candidates. Also between elections political parties can give tax receipts for contributions.

I cannot stress it enough; freer voting will not have a negative effect on either the continuance of political parties, nor on their ability to meld together various divergent viewpoints. Freer voting does not mean that on every issue members will be voting in unpredictable ways. As I stated in the beginning of my speech, on issues where the party platform is clear, members would be expected to support the party. It is in those other areas outside the platform where I believe freer voting should be allowed.

It is also argued that the government will be criticized for bringing legislation forward and then telling members that defeat of the measure will not be deemed to be a vote of non-confidence in the government. It will be argued that the government is wasting House time with proposed legislation that it does not care about.

I believe that instead of being criticized for such an attitude the government will be praised for allowing all elected members to take part in the policy influencing process. Too often governments have taken the House of Commons for granted, paying lip service to obtain support on critical votes and lapsing back into a dictatorial demeanour.

Another argument presented against freer voting is that if dissent is allowed the government will not be able to make tough decisions because members will duck making unpopular but necessary decisions. While the possibility of dissent may make it tougher for political parties to take potentially unpopular stands, it also presents a challenge, a challenge to inform the public of the necessity of an unpopular decision. It may also force political parties when they are developing an election platform to be as forward thinking as possible so most issues are

covered in the party platform and there are no surprises for the public after the election.

Another point often made is that there are plenty of other avenues open to a member to show his or her displeasure with party leadership than voting against the party line in the House of Commons. While at first glance this may seem to be true, there are in reality few effective means available to members to express dissent.

For example, a private member's bill takes a very long time to become law under the best of circumstances. Question period, because the list is controlled by the party leadership, is a difficult time for a dissident government backbencher. Such a member may get to ask one tough question and that is it.

The criticisms regarding the relaxation of confidence convention and freer votes are simply not valid. What is valid is the need for the political courage necessary to start freer voting. Leadership on this issue must come from the government. Once this has been shown, opposition parties must agree to allow dissent so that all members are free to express views which may differ from those of their political party leadership. This will require a change in attitude and political courage. However if this results in more members playing a vital role in the influencing of public policy then dissent will have been worth the time spent to reduce party discipline.

I look forward to the debate on this motion and I urge all members to support it as it will send a clear message to Canadians that we are not afraid of the party leadership punishing us for exercising independent thoughts and actions, as has been done in the past. We want to play a meaningful role in influencing the formation of public policy which addresses the needs of all Canadians.

• (1130)

The Deputy Speaker: Colleagues, because of the statements earlier, the private member's debate will last until 12.08 p.m.

I would ask all members to please refer to people who are still in this House by the names of their constituencies or titles rather than by their proper names.

Mr. Ted McWhinney (Vancouver Quadra): Mr. Speaker, after hearing the thoughtful address by the member for Mission—Coquitlam, I was unfortunately reminded of a recent movie entitled "Back to the Future".

The ideas of the Reform Party on the Constitution seem sadly out of date, as if they had been reading pre-1914 textbooks. Without any derogatory reference to the member for Mission—Coquitlam, I would rather have heard the other Jennings invoked. I refer to the Jennings whom you know, Mr. Speaker, and I know and who taught briefly at the University of British