

*Standing Orders*

Parties in this House. It shows that the Opposition Parties have not simply been negative when it comes to further changes in the rules. They have not been obstructive when it comes to further changes in the rules, including changes to which the Government was favourable. However, the current Parliamentary Committee on Elections, Privileges and Procedure only reported in April, and it was only after that that we learned with certainty exactly what the Government wanted to achieve to suit its purposes on matters such as Routine Proceedings and time allocation and other issues as well.

• (1240)

The Government House Leader finally admitted in the concluding minutes of his speech that the Government is acting in the way it is with respect to Routine Proceedings and time allocation because of its unhappiness over the time taken by the House in the consideration of only one Bill out of many, Bill C-22, the Bill on prescription drugs. The time in question was certainly not excessive in view of the importance of the Bill to millions of Canadians. The time was certainly not excessive in view of the fact that the Bill is now law.

The Government is now in a position to move on to other elements of its legislative program, but it is not doing that. Instead it is taking the time of the House with this motion that flies in the face of our tradition of bringing about changes in our rules, a tradition that this is done by consensus and not by the Government attempting to force rules changes on the House with its majority.

Beginning in 1982 successive committees have had our rules and procedures under active consideration. As a result, both recommendations, as well as constructive non-partisan consultations by the House Leaders of all three Parties, a great deal of progress has been made toward making the House of Commons more modern and more effective as a democratic institution.

When I say "effective" I do not mean merely efficient. We have all come to accept that the House deals with the business that the government places before it. We in opposition may disagree with government measures. We may seek to alter or delay their proposals. But we recognize that the House, in the fullness of time, does deal with these measures, though this does not mean that we must ultimately, as opposition Parties, approve them.

In fact the record of this Parliament clearly demonstrates that we have been willing to deal with government legislation such as it is. We have opposed, generally vigorously, that legislation which we have considered bad. But the legislative record of this Parliament, in terms of its quantity at least, has not been, by comparison, bad.

Although we differ in our interpretation of the benefits to our country of the amount of legislation proposed by the Government, the governing Party, the Conservative Party, has already trumpeted exactly this fact in its own propaganda, its

own information that it conveys to its supporters and to the country.

We do not believe that this Government has presented much in the way of good legislation. But it has been able to get a large quantity of its legislation—good, bad or indifferent—through the House. Therefore it can be said with certainty that this has not been an obstructive Parliament.

I referred to the need of the House to be an effective democratic institution because it is not here merely to serve as a mill for government legislation. Parliament is here to study, to present improvements and, at times, to oppose government legislation. But also one of the most important roles of Parliament, a role just as important as legislating, is to hold the Government to account. To accomplish this we have developed in Parliament an adversarial system. The principal responsibility to hold government to account is given to the Official Opposition. Obviously, that is the role of other opposition Parties as well.

Governments are in office because they hold a majority in the House. By virtue of that majority they can, and in the long run do, control most of the legislative business of Parliament. There are rules to assure this outcome. As I have already said, these rules have worked effectively to this end during this Parliament.

We must bear in mind that the rules are already overwhelmingly stacked in the Government's favour. The Government controls the agenda of Parliament. The Government has the power to limit debate. This Government especially does not shrink from doing so.

Also the Government—in the final analysis when it comes to information it has to be said—controls much of the information with which Parliament must attempt to work. However, along the way, in order to fulfil its function of holding the government majority to account, the opposing minority must have ample opportunity to criticize and to alert the public to government measures or actions that it deems to be hostile, contrary to the public interest.

This requires debate. Sometimes it requires delay. The rules of the House have been purposefully designed to this end. They are not devices for playful or blind partisanship. They exist to hold governments to account and to permit the public to have an ongoing say as to how it is governed.

In this Parliament we in the Opposition have used the instruments that the rules give us to enable the public to have time to become aware of and to have its say about government legislation. We have sometimes been more active in this than on other occasions. However, every time we have used the rules it has been for the democratic purposes for which they were designed. We may have, on occasion, vexed the Government and its supporters, but I suggest that has happened only when there have been either serious differences of opinion as to what is the best course for the country, or all too often on those occasions when the Government has breached or crossed the fine line from use to abuse of power.