

Motion under S.O. 75C

country, and under those circumstances, and having regard to the traditions of Canada—never mind the “mother of parliament”—claiming that there is here a situation which demands the imposition of closure, is sheer nonsense. The fact that has developed the nature of our parliamentary system and the nature of this country is that this country is populated along a narrow perimeter, and even with modern means of communication it takes a long time for the other side of the coin to be seen. We saw that in the gun control bill earlier, when finally the force of public opinion was brought upon the head of the government as a result of long debate which caused them to withdraw the bill. That is the only weapon the opposition has, unfortunately, and we do not relish using it.

● (1610)

It is all right for hon. members to talk about rules and reform, but what happens in parliament is that the weight of the bureaucracy and the weight of the executive has lowered itself more heavily on each turn of the wheel of parliamentary reform. We talk in terms of shortening debate, of lessening discussion, of cutting out opportunities to deal with estimates to the point that our system has become unbalanced. What is left for the opposition but to argue the point and hope that the people of Canada will see the other side of the coin?

I would be the last to argue that there is no place in our system for closure, for cutting off debate or for setting a time limit on debate, but I would be the first to argue that the imposition of closure on this bill is wrong. It is obvious that there is a real question about this bill. Members of the government have spoken against the bill, and this is the essence of debate in the House of Commons.

We talk about maintaining our heritage, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that is part of our heritage is the opportunity to examine the issues of the day at reasonable length. There is another obligation upon parliament, and this time it falls upon the government. There is an obligation on the government to listen to the opposition once in awhile. When we talk about legislative experience, everyone harks back to earlier in the session when we dealt with Bill C-19 which had an inordinate time in debate. We put it to the stubborn Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang) and to the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce (Mr. Chrétien) that if they would delete two sections of the bill the debate would be short. The colleagues of the Minister of Transport leaned upon him and were able to get him to agree to our reasonable request, and the debate ended.

I raise that matter, not to draw a parallel but that it not be forgotten there is an obligation upon the government to consider the nature of the legislative program, to consider the nature of the country and to consider the advice it gets from the opposition from time to time. I do not want it to be said that we are not interested in seeing reasonable legislation go through the House.

If hon. members would check the order paper of March 28 and note the progress of bills before this parliament, they would see that the opposition has dealt fairly with the govern-

[Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton).]

ment. Bill C-11, the Pension Act, has been referred to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Bill C-24, the Immigration Act, had a short debate because the issues were discussed openly on a white paper basis before the bill came to the House, and now the bill has gone to committee. Bill C-25, the Canadian Human Rights Act, is still being discussed in the newspapers but after debate in the House it went to committee. Bill C-35, the Old Age Security Act, has gone through in all stages, and Bill C-37 the federal-provincial fiscal arrangements and established programs financing act, 1977, has gone through all stages.

The opposition has no choice in the legislative program—the government proposes, and parliament disposes. I must say that the record of this parliament is not bad. There has been reasonable consultation about some things, at least. The criticism levelled at parliament by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Cullen) ought to be levelled at the government House leader. He was not criticized, but he has taken a lethargic attitude toward parliament. Unfortunately, he is not here most of the time; his heart is still with external affairs.

An hon. Member: That's a cheap shot.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): It is true. The other matter that we might as well go into now is that the government has refused, week after week, to give us an idea of what it wants to deal with. It changes its mind all the time: it tells us we will deal with a particular bill one day, then changes its mind and brings in a different one. The fault lies in the management of the affairs of the government on the floor of the House of Commons, and not with the opposition. I do not say these things about the government House leader unkindly, but I say them professionally. We have a lethargic House of Commons, for many reasons, and one is the leadership of the government with respect to the business of the House.

Shortening speeches will not make the essential difference in this House. What will make the difference is if members of parliament are provided with reasonable information, and not just in the question period. Perhaps the government should look at how we deal with estimates and ensure that members on all sides of the House have an opportunity to examine the expenditures of the government to see if they meet the needs of the country. Perhaps we ought to use the white paper approach to all major bills so that before the lines are drawn there is an opportunity for people to participate, as there was with the immigration bill. That was, in general, a good bill. Extensive committee hearings were held across the country and debate in the House was short. Members of parliament should be given some access to the public service of Canada so that they can examine the advice given to this government. Do not always blame the opposition.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. I regret to interrupt the hon. member, but his time has expired. The hon. member for Comox-Alberni (Mr. Anderson).