

*Standing Orders*

arbitrarily limit the right of members to speak is to limit the capacity of the government to understand and respond to the problems of Canadians.

We believe that government has the right and responsibility to govern. The rules of parliament should help the Government to govern well. We support the reform of parliament. We support it enthusiastically and out of conviction. But we draw the line at certain fundamental and unnecessary changes which would deform parliament and make it ineffective.

We draw the line at proposals which would put parliament in the hands of the government because that, we believe, would reverse the appropriate relation. Parliament must not be made subservient to the government. Parliament must continue to be responsible to the people through parliament. That is a parliamentary tradition and we defend it today, not because it is an old tradition or even because it is a British tradition but because it is a good tradition and the best safeguard we have against arbitrary government. It is, in the final analysis, the only safeguard we have.

I could go on and read much more of this very important debate that occurred on December 10, 1968. It was a speech uttered by the Hon. Robert L. Stanfield, Leader of the Opposition at that time. Mr. Stanfield was concerned that the Liberals of the day were bringing in changes to the Standing Orders which he felt would facilitate the Government's plans at the expense of the role and effectiveness of the Opposition.

● (1530)

Nearly 20 years have elapsed and today we see a repeat performance by the Conservative Government of the day because it has been unable to complete its business in the traditional calendar time.

I point out that for decades Governments have been able to complete their business in the traditional calendar year. As my friend, the Member for Cowichan—Malahat—The Islands (Mr. Manly), points out, the Government did not even recall Parliament until October of this year and as a result of an extra four weeks of summer recess and because of its hopelessness, abysmal record, inexperience and unwillingness to co-operate, the Government cannot complete its agenda within the prescribed calendar year and wants to extend the sitting into the summer.

I humbly suggest that if we sat for 12 months of the year, sat through Christmas and Easter, I suspect the same problem would exist. The Government would indicate that it is unable to deal effectively with the challenges and issues facing Canada. It simply cannot run the Government effectively and efficiently.

As the Hon. Robert Stanfield, the then Leader of the Opposition said in 1968, the rules of the House of Commons do not make a Government effective. It is the Government itself.

I also want to quote some words of the Hon. Stanley Knowles who said, during that debate: "If we are here to make a shambles of it, we can do it no matter how good the rules are. If we are here to do the business of the people of Canada, we can do that even if the rules are not as good as they might be. Nevertheless, we think there are reforms that must be made.

Today, we reflect that precise view. After participating with other Parties in parliamentary reform for many weeks, months and years, and recognizing changes in society, it is obvious that changes in the House of Commons are appropriate and necessary. However, we must remind members of the Government that the rules are only as good as the players. A speed limit of 90 kilometres on one of our highways is only as effective as the willingness of the people to co-operate with the rules.

Let us consider the reason for these changes. The Government has indicated on a number of occasions that it wants to conduct the business of the House, referring to the so-called drug Bill, Bill C-22, when the Opposition stalled the passage of that Bill for some time. That is what we did, but it is our job. We did not stop the Bill or prohibit the Government from completing its agenda to change the patent laws for prescription drug companies. However, we wanted to focus the attention of Canadians on what we believe is a very Draconian and punitive piece of legislation. We believe we have accomplished that goal and that Canadians are aware that the Government introduced a drug Bill that will give a monopoly to a foreign drug company for ten years so that it can charge whatever it wants before any competition is permitted in Canada. That would obviously drive up the price of prescription drugs in the future, and we believe that is inappropriate. Therefore, we used the procedures of the House of Commons to focus attention on that particular issue.

The Government is wrong to suggest that it was prohibited from completing its agenda because, unfortunately, the Bill did pass through the House. The Government's arguments that the Opposition has been able to keep it from conducting its business are hollow.

While we have many concerns about reform, I believe this is not the place to negotiate changes to the Standing Orders or to the rules and procedures of the House of Commons. However, it is an opportunity to reflect on the procedure that has been used and on the process of parliamentary reform to improve the rules and regulations of the House.

Many of us were shocked and aghast at the fact that the Government decided to make an end run, circumvent the process and do what it felt best in terms of changing the rules of Parliament rather than complete the round of negotiations we had been undertaking for so many weeks and months.

While we are concerned about the process, we are still hopeful, since this motion has not passed, that there is still time for the three political Parties in Parliament to work together to attempt a negotiated settlement with which we can all live and in which there will be give and take on both sides. We remain optimistic and we are here to co-operate as an effective opposition in Parliament. We believe that part of our role is to keep the Government honest, to keep it on the straight and narrow, to focus attention and oppose whenever we believe it is appropriate.