

Procedure and Organization

as some would have us believe, that we must somehow on occasion tolerate these minorities. We know what the results have been in countries where that has been attempted. If that is the attitude in this house, we shudder with fear at the results which could occur.

Minorities have been dreadfully important in many different cases in numerous countries for the effective survival of basic human rights. Minorities have a right to exist on their own terms. Surely, in parliament minorities are important. They offer a type of safeguard, independence and special vantage point that is never available to the majority, regardless of who forms that majority.

We have seen a callous disregard for those rights and the adoption by this government of a motto that "Might makes right". Why have they adopted this point of view? One is tempted to believe that perhaps the members opposite or those who are in control have been too long used to power. Their vision has become blurred as to what is really at stake, namely, the protection of the vital rights and privileges of this parliament. Perhaps they have even become a bit self-centred.

In the past the Prime Minister has expressed a fondness for authoritarian régimes, some perhaps idealistic, but authoritarian none the less. We are tempted to believe that he is trying to introduce some of that same philosophy into the workings of what up until now has been a relatively free parliament. In years to come, people will not look favourably on the backward step that has been proposed in this house today.

What is really at stake in dealing with this issue? Surely, one of the basic issues in this debate has been the continual erosion of legislative power and responsibility, with a build-up of responsibility to the point of irresponsibility in the executive branch. It makes one wonder what is really happening to the ultimate responsibility of parliament. We have accepted too easily the erosion of legislative responsibility.

The rule changes accepted last December were mentioned earlier today. One of the fundamental changes was the removal of something that had been with free parliaments since earliest day, 'the power of the purse'. This power was removed almost without a murmur. That is not the only thing that has happened to the attrition of the rights of parliament. Anyone who has sat in this house day after day knows that the government unilaterally decided it was sufficient for their purposes to have only part of the cabinet

present in the house each day during the question period. The government decided these few ministers could tell parliament all parliament needed to know about what the executive was doing. This downgrading of the question period was more evidence of the nuisance factor the government obviously considered parliament to be.

We have seen an increasingly rigid parliamentary discipline being imposed on government members, not only on questions of an economic or legal nature, but on issues that are highly personal, social and moral, on which the government has taken an absolutely rigid stand. In many ways we have seen the further erosion of legislative responsibility. This new evidence today surely will not surprise hon. members very much.

The Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Basford) referred earlier to the fact that it is the people who really count. I could not agree more. The people of Canada will realize what is being proposed here. It is not just a question of the limitation of the number of speeches that will be made on a certain bill, it is the limitation of the full and free representation that people expect when they elect a person to serve them in the parliament of this country.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): I find it difficult to believe that members opposite accepted with equanimity the proposition of the government house leader this afternoon. There are too many members in that party for whom I have respect; people who have served this country in other roles, such as deans of law and who have given leadership in other forums. If they examine closely the proposal before us, they will use every ounce of persuasion they have, both publicly and privately, to make sure we do not commit ourselves to what can only be a travesty on the dignity and validity of this house. I say, for the sake of the future functioning and effectiveness of this place, not only for its own sake but for the sake of the people of this country, in God's name let us not take this step.

● (8:20 p.m.)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): I am encouraged to think that the proposals of the government house leader this afternoon perhaps are more peevish, and maybe even a bit childish, than a serious examination of the steps he proposes to take. I would find it difficult to