

*Government Orders*

would decide, from a vastly increased number of members, who will substitute for those members who are unable to participate in a particular committee at a particular time. I predict that what will happen is you will find that government members will not name alternates. The government Whip can then name his own alternates from this large pool of backbenchers. That will have the effect of diluting rather than building up expertise on the committee. We will, in effect, have gone back to the old system where the Whip would have the power to simply flood the committee with people who did not know what they were talking about to be there for a crucial 15 minutes prior to a vote, vote down what the people are proposing who do know what they are talking about on the committee, and move on again.

• (1620)

I think that is another step away from the McGrath report.

We saw a further erosion a couple of weeks ago of what I thought we had established through the McGrath reform. It is not related to this package. Twice I rose in this House on a point of order complaining that the government was interpreting opposition day motions as matters of confidence. We went to great lengths—because free votes are one of the ways in which you increase the power of the private member—to get the language of confidence out of the Standing Orders with respect to opposition motions. And we took it out. It is not there anymore. Those motions which are votable are no longer described as confidence motions, they are simply described as motions that will come to a vote. That was deliberate.

Two weeks or so ago, just before the Easter break, I heard members getting up and saying: “Well, these are matters of confidence”, and repeating the same old argument as if the McGrath committee had never met, never mind recommended it. It was at that point that I finally came to believe, because I resist believing these kinds of things, that the government is intent—I hope not deliberately, but it certainly is having this effect—of completely eroding the spirit of the McGrath committee.

They had a very simple motion before them to reaffirm medicare. It did not imply any criticism of anybody. We all could have voted for it, Mr. Speaker. The House of Commons could have expressed itself unanimously with respect to an important social program. Instead, we were treated to this very disappointing argumentation on the part of the government that this was, after all, a motion of confidence.

One of the crucial breakthroughs of the McGrath committee was that those opposition day motions procedurally were changed in such a way as to create the freedom for government backbenchers, and for that matter for members of other parties, to vote as they chose on those motions.

We have not seen that. It is not just the government's fault, it is the fault of our whole political culture which focuses on dissent as weakness rather than as a possible sign of strength. So we have not seen the kind of free thinking that we had envisaged at that point.

But to have the government get up and basically kill it by giving that interpretation of opposition day motions, I think was really unfortunate. It had not worked yet, but it might have worked. If the government holds to the position that it held two weeks ago about opposition day motions, it will never work.

With respect to committees once again, the government argues that it wants people to have this week in their ridings so that they can talk to their constituents, while at the same time it is changing the rules with respect to committees so the people will find it harder to talk to their members when they are on committees that are actually dealing with things, for instance, if they are on legislative committees.

There seems to me to be a contradiction here. Do you want members to be able to talk to people who are concerned about things? Then you should not just provide more time for them to meet with them in the coffee shops, the school auditoriums and the church basements. You should at least maintain what time there is for them to talk to members who are concerned about a particular bill and who are sitting on a committee which is looking at a bill that may concern people. They may want to talk to their member or to the members on the committee about it.