

The Address

• (1610)

[English]

Hon. Harvie Andre (Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to address this House during this throne speech debate, particularly on that part of the throne speech which had the chapter heading "Changing the way Ottawa works".

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, many changes were made in the proceedings of this House over the nearly 20 years since I was elected here. I think the most important one was the broadcasting of our proceedings because it brought about fundamental changes in the way we deal with public business. Television cameras gave Canadians access to this House. Canadian men and women in the comfort of their home can watch the work of their elected representatives. Mr. Speaker, it is estimated that about one million Canadians watch the parliamentary channel each week to listen to debates on a bill, hear a statement by their member or watch the Question Period, which is the best show of all.

[English]

Nevertheless, in my view this is just one of the many factors which have contributed to our image problem.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, that is precisely the issue I would like to deal with now. As a member and as a Canadian, I am deeply concerned about the low esteem and consideration of Canadians for their elected representatives, not only members of this House but also other representatives at all levels. Members of the House of Commons should take this problem seriously and do all that is needed to restore confidence and respect for elected representatives.

[English]

The erosion of confidence in the very foundation of our democratic system must be addressed. It is our intention to do that or at least to try to make some progress in this session of Parliament.

The issue is the disrepute into which we politicians, we members of Parliament—and I think all elected politi-

cians in Canada suffer in this regard, but in particular, we in this House of Commons—have fallen.

The fundamental element of our democratic system is the election in which Canadians, by secret ballot, elect men and women to represent them in their legislatures, city councils, and here in Parliament. Yet the polls all tell us that those who the people of Canada elect are held in very low esteem. Indeed, in looking at the most fundamental question facing the country—namely the question of unity, the question of the Constitution—serious people, people of high repute, people for whom I have a great deal of respect, suggest that the best way to examine these changes is to exclude entirely from the process anybody who has been elected.

For people to seriously suggest that holding elective office is an obstacle to participation in the most fundamental question facing the country is to suggest that they have little respect for the institutions in which we function and that the very basis of our democratic system is in some jeopardy.

That sends signals to us that we would be fools to ignore, not only for our own personal welfare as elected people, but certainly in terms of what we all want in the end. That is to see the survival and prosperity of this democratic country and the institution of which we are a part, which is fundamental to the future of the country, to a democratic system. We cannot have a free and prosperous society without this democratic foundation, an institution like this if not this one specifically.

What is the reason for this? Why have the people of Canada reached these conclusions about those of us whom they have elected to higher office? Well, one of the factors is certainly a skewed and very limited view of House proceedings. TV, which preys on our adversarial system, does not provide the opportunity to see a lot of what goes on. We all know, as members of Parliament, that there is a lot of good work that goes on in committees and many other ways around here. We know that there are debates that are held which are not watched with great enthusiasm, they are not applauded. The press gallery today, as every day, is empty of observers.

When I first arrived here, there was always at least one member of the press gallery on behalf of Canadian Press reporting on the debates. That does not happen any more.