

Division Bells Procedure

have four hours". "Sorry, there will not be a vote". "Well, they were all just in here". "I know, but they have all taken off".

● (1250)

I think what you were pointing to, Mr. Speaker, is that this does not lend itself, to understate the case, to enhancing or even preserving the dignity of the House of Commons, or the perception of democracy as something conducted by adults in a reasonable manner within which context there are rules for disagreement. I certainly agree with everyone who has said we have to do something about this. If doing something has to be part and parcel of giving more genuine power and input not just to opposition Parties per se, but to back-benchers and Parliament itself, then so be it.

I have a special interest in this, as you know, Mr. Speaker, as Vice-Chairman of the Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedure. I regret that we did not come up with a solution to the bells problem, but in order to do that we would have had to come up with a solution to the over-all problem that Members of Parliament in general, and opposition Parties, official or otherwise, do not have enough genuine input into the process around here. That is the problem and delay becomes the only mechanism by which people can indicate they are dead serious about their opposition to something. They want the opportunity through delay to allow public opinion perhaps to mobilize or whatever.

Delay does have its benefits. Delay is not always the bad thing that the Government House Leader would have us believe. The word "efficiency" is thrown around too loosely. I would like this place to be as efficient as possible, but what the Government House Leader means by that word is not what I have in mind. Quite often he means the Government getting its legislation through as quickly as possible regardless of the contrary views here in the House of Commons.

What I wanted to point out, Mr. Speaker, is that there should not be too much self-righteousness on either side of the House in this issue. Some of the tactics employed by the Opposition have been embarrassing. Although I have not been here very long, I paid attention to the role of Parliament for a long time before I got here, and no one has done more damage to Parliament over the years as the central political institution in this country than the Liberal Party of Canada. They have done this by making major policy announcements outside of the House, by Ministers refusing to make statements in this House so that people can respond to them. They have done this through some of the rule changes they forced through unilaterally in 1968. The list goes on, Mr. Speaker, of the way in which the Party now in power has taken away from Parliament as an institution. So let us not have the Government House Leader get up and wax eloquently and self-righteously about his appreciation for Parliament. If he has that appreciation as an individual, then he ought to do something about his Party and he ought to be more honest about the role they have played in downgrading this institution. Then maybe we can take him seriously.

You have laid out the options with respect to the bells, Mr. Speaker. Either we can continue as we have, with the decision on when a vote is taken resting completely with the Whips, which I hope everyone regards as unacceptable; or you could have more authority as the Speaker to decide; or we could have a Standing Order. What I want to say goes back to the recommendations made by the special committee, which were mentioned by the Hon. Member for Yukon. Right now the Speaker does not have that kind of authority. This is no reflection on your personal competence or ability to do the job; it is a reflection on the structure here. That is why we recommended that the Speaker be genuinely elected by the House of Commons; that there be a process for electing the Speaker which would give the Speaker of the House of Commons more genuine moral authority in the House. Then option number two would, I think, be much more acceptable.

However, going beyond the question of the bells, I think this is an opportunity for us to reflect on why it is that the Chair in its present circumstances feels the limitations it does. This is because of the way in which the Speakership has grown up over the years in Canada. This again is a peculiarly Canadian problem. The Speaker of the House of Commons in Westminster has much more moral authority than the Speaker of the House of Commons in Canada has ever had because the appointment is much more removed from the perception that it is the will of the Government only and not that of the House of Commons. This is an opportunity for us to reflect on that.

Having said that, I would just like to say one more thing before I sit down with respect to the comment the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) is reported to have made some time before I got here, in 1979 I believe, that when Members of Parliament get 50 feet off the Hill they are nobodies. Mr. Speaker, my contention, having listened to many witnesses in the special committee and from my own experience as a Member of Parliament, is that it is just the other way around. When we get off the Hill and we are in our constituency, or speaking at a conference, or anywhere but in the House of Commons, we are somebody because our people expect that Members of Parliament have a larger role to play in how this country is run than we actually do.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Blaikie: It is when we get into the House of Commons that we are nobodies. For the most part we have absolutely no effect on what goes on around here. There are exceptions, but one of the things we have to do to revitalize this institution is change our political culture and the way we now regard Parliament. A big change in that respect will have to come from that side of the House because they are the Government, they are one of the Parties which is a contender for government in the next election, and because they in all likelihood—God forbid, but this is the way Canadian history works out—might be the Government again.

Mr. Stevens: Hear, hear!