

The record should show that what happened yesterday morning was just silly games being played by the opposition.

Senator Frith: You always characterize anything you lose as being "silly".

[Translation]

• (0940)

Hon. Jacques Hébert: Honourable senators, one of the great successes of this government is that it has mocked our parliamentary system to such an extent that public opinion no longer reacts to abuses of the worst kind. We still remember the scandal created a long time ago when a Liberal government used the guillotine during the pipeline debate.

Now, that type of scandal is commonplace since the Tories came to power.

A few days ago, my colleague Senator Molgat quoted what Professor Robert Jackson said at a workshop organized here in the Senate. I may add that Senators Lynch-Staunton and Barootes were also present. I was there and I could not believe my ears when the distinguished professor revealed that, since 1988, the present government has used the guillotine more often than all prior governments combined since Confederation, so much so that the media do not react anymore.

Canadians will end up believing that democracy demands that the opposition be stifled and that ordinary citizens or agencies that represent them be prevented from saying they disagree with a bill.

Bill C-113 is a typical example of this reactionary attitude. Time allocation was imposed first, in the House of Commons, at all stages, and then in the Senate.

In fact, it was even worse when they restricted public hearings to four hours and seven witnesses, although dozens of other witnesses were prepared to come, as Senator Frith just pointed out, from all over Canada, because the committee refused to leave Ottawa and go to the regions to listen to present and future victims of Bill C-113.

Yesterday morning, a little after nine o'clock, as Senator Di Nino said just now, Liberal members of the National Finance committee tried to persuade the government to reverse its decision. All they managed to get — because the Conservative majority was late — was an hour's adjournment. They hoped that meanwhile the government would reconsider and give a little more substance to this pretence at public hearings.

Senator Bolduc made quite a hue and cry, accusing the Liberals of wasting one hour of the four hours available for these hearings. Doesn't the senator realize that three, four or even ten hours wouldn't make a difference?

A bill that will affect millions of Canadians who are among the neediest in this country certainly deserves to be examined in depth, and Canadians should have been given a chance to express their views. The committee should have held public hearings at least in the country's five regions, and preferably in each province. It should have announced the schedule for the hearings well in advance. The hearings could have been spread over a period of several weeks without any serious inconvenience.

The few witnesses the government bothered to invite were outraged at the way they were treated. It was probably the first time or, at most, one of the few times they were ever asked to present a brief with less than 24 hours' notice.

I am surprised that these witnesses, who represent major groups of union and non-union workers, well known women's groups, and so forth, came in spite of all that. I am surprised they bothered to come, since the whole thing is so useless. It was a farce. Some Conservative senators had no compunction about demonstrating their disagreement with the eminently reasonable arguments that were submitted. Senator Simard, with his usual tact, even interrupted some witnesses to contradict them. Now I ask you!

It was obvious the government would go through the motions of hearing a few witnesses but had no intention of making the slightest changes in Bill C-113. Harvie Andre gave Senators Murray and Lynch-Staunton their orders: "I need a Royal Assent by April 2. Get with it!" I am sure that is the kind of language Mr. Andre would have used.

In an editorial published in *Le Droit* on February 11, under the heading "a biased bill", columnist Murray Maltais hit the nail on the head. He said, and I quote:

The Unemployment Insurance Bill is generating more than opposition. It is raising a veritable storm. Employers and employees both finance the unemployment insurance plan. The government bill is biased: it gives employers all the rights and employees all the obligations. Non-union workers will be the worst off. For instance, a crooked employer —

Any businessman!

— will be in a better position to take advantage of his employee because the burden of proof in all cases will be on the employee. This ruthless measure is a flagrant contradiction of the presumption of innocence.