

Amendment to Standing Orders

• (5:30 p.m.)

Mr. D. Gordon Blair (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I believe every member of this House shares some of the sentiments which have been expressed by the hon. member who moved this motion. All would agree, I feel, that the general interest of the House is best served when procedural changes are made only after the widest search for a consensus and only after seeking the concurrence of all hon. members or, at least, of all the important parties represented in the House of Commons.

However, it has been shown by the history of this chamber, as indeed it has been shown by history at Westminster, that this type of consensus cannot always easily be obtained. During the first session of this Parliament I had occasion to look very carefully at the many changes which have been made in the rules at Westminster in recent years. We pay great attention, and I think properly so, because of the long history of that Parliament, to its rules, usages and procedures. The work which was undertaken in reforming and revising the rules of this House owes a great deal to the experience of our fellow legislators at Westminster.

I found that many of the recent rule changes at Westminster were proposed by representatives of the government party. Many of the most important were passed only after debate and after recorded divisions. On reading those debates and the comments on them I did not find anywhere the suggestion that it was improper for a majority of members to make a decision to change the rules. In fact, what press comment I saw was to the effect that the government had not moved quickly enough or gone far enough in proposing these changes.

My first contention is, therefore, that it is not improper or in any way anti-democratic, or against the interests of a parliamentary system, for the rules of this chamber to be altered by decision of a majority of its members. Indeed, speaking in terms of democratic principle I would suggest it is much more difficult to assert the view that a small minority in this chamber should have the power of veto to prevent changes being made—that a small minority should have the power to paralyse. I do not hesitate to advance this contention. It is a demonstrable democratic fact that the group which is held accountable by the people of Canada for the actions of this chamber is the majority party.

There is no democratic mechanism, as far as I am aware, which can call to account a

[Mr. Barnett.]

small minority which may impede important and necessary changes. On the other hand, the power of the majority must be exercised with prudence and discretion; if the majority acts unwisely, at least the people know who is responsible. If improper action is taken, the people have their right and they can exercise it against the majority. But I say it is impossible for the people acting in this fashion to call to account a small minority which may on given occasions have the power to veto important changes in this chamber.

There is one example which will be recalled by all hon. members. As they know, the constitution of the United States provides that the President shall have power, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties provided two-thirds of the Senators present concur. I suppose there was no sadder decision in all recent history than the decision of the United States Senate not to ratify the League of Nations. We all know in retrospect that this was a terrible decision. The proposal received majority support but not the necessary support by two-thirds of those present. We remember, of course, the words which ring down through the doleful history of our times; the late President Wilson's description of the "little group of wilful men" who frustrated him in taking an action which to a large extent, in the opinion of many people, might have obviated the slaughter we experienced later on.

It is my contention that in terms of democratic principle it is proper that decisions as to changes in the rules of this House should be left with a simple majority.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Blair: The majority is accountable. The majority will suffer if it acts improperly. On the other hand, the minority is not accountable. It cannot be found. There is no way in which the public can express its views on the inaction imposed by the minority in circumstances which might arise if the proposed motion were passed.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): They could defeat the minority at the next election.

Mr. Blair: Well, that has been happening for all the elections I can remember. The minority has never obtained the degree of confidence from the public which would enable it to form a government. I say this in no unkindly way. I appreciate the desirability