

*Private Members' Business*

the House they can speak and vote as they like. "If they choose to deviate from the party line they are free to do so provided they accept the political risks".

● (1120)

It was these political risks that the McGrath committee through its recommendations was trying to minimize. The committee went on to describe the ideal situation. "Rigid discipline is hardly compatible with a philosophy of a democratic political party, and reasonable latitude consistent with loyalty to the party should be permitted the individual members of any party".

This was the middle ground which the committee sought and it is the middle ground that the motion before the House today seeks to establish: loyalty to a political party, but not blind loyalty, loyalty combined with the latitude to vote against the party line on occasion.

The McGrath committee offered five observations on the confidence convention and this is one of them.

In a Parliament with a government in command of the majority the matter of confidence has really been settled by the electorate. Short of a reversal of allegiance or some major cataclysmic political event the question of confidence is really a fait accompli. The government and other parties should therefore have the wisdom to permit members to decide many matters in their own deliberative judgment. Overuse of party whips and of confidence motions devalues both these important institutions.

We are fortunate in this Parliament to have two members of that committee still with us, the hon. member for Winnipeg Transcona, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It is my hope that both will find time to speak on the motion before it comes to a vote.

More recently in April 1993 the House management committee recommended:

Members of Parliament should be made more aware of a confidence convention and the observations of the special committee on Reform of the House of Commons. With few exceptions, motions proposed by the government should be considered as motions of confidence only when clearly identified as such by the government.

However, the committee which was made up of many members who are still in this Parliament, such as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, the Minister of Health and the hon. member for Saint-Léonard were realistic in its prediction of the effect of this recommendation. It stated:

The Canadian parliamentary system does have extremely strong party discipline, one that is perhaps stronger than in many other systems. The committee endorses the idea of freeing up voting in the House but we hesitate to create unreasonably high expectations. It is not a procedural issue. Ultimately it is up to the individual members and Parliament.

Why did these groups of members of this place in previous Parliaments feel relaxation of the confidence convention and freer voting were so important? I believe that these members properly read the mood of the Canadian public.

With the advent of the information age, the public is better informed about political institutions. The work of the members of these institutions, and as a result the public, is less willing to follow without questioning the lead of elected representatives. They expect their representatives to be well informed and represent the best interests of their constituents. This well informed public does not respond to leadership the way it used to. The actions of Canadians in the referendum on the Charlottetown accord is ample evidence of their refusal to be blindly led.

The public also expects its elected representatives not to be blindly led. As well the public feels disenfranchised when members are forced by the threat of dire consequences to a member's political future to vote in a fashion which is perceived by the public to not represent the public interest. Lack of independence in voting is equated with lack of influence in the policy making process. Those involved in the political process make the argument that the influence of the private member is exercised in caucus or in private meetings with ministers. For the public this is not good enough any more.

The public wants to feel that its views are taken into consideration more than just every four or five years at general elections. The public also wants to see a public demonstration that its views are being heard and acted on. This public demonstration most often occurs in the act of voting by an MP.

This exercise of independence by members of the House of Commons has occurred to a great extent in Great Britain and their system of responsible government has survived. In the period between April 1972 and April 1979 there were 65 defeats of the government in Great Britain. These defeats were important because they helped destroy the myth that had arisen to the effect that any government defeat endangered its continuance in office.

They were also important in that they influenced the behaviour of subsequent members of Parliament by established a precedent. MPs from all parties became less willing to accept party dictates on matters of policy and voting. Those who defied the party whips discovered they could do so with little negative sanction and were encouraged to do so more often. Others were influenced in turn by their example.

● (1125)

In Canada our experience with cross voting is more limited but in the sixties and seventies we did have experience with governments losing votes and not resigning.