

*Government Orders*

If the House were to support having the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs examine and report on this institution of freer votes, it has also been suggested that the committee should examine how freer votes, freer than the ones we have in this Parliament, came about in the British Parliament, the mother of Parliaments.

I stand to be corrected by members who may have more intimate knowledge of the evolution of this practice in the British House, but my understanding is that the current free vote convention in that Parliament, while not as extensive as the one Reformers propose for here, came about not at the initiative of the cabinet and not at the initiative of the Prime Minister but at the initiative of the backbenchers.

• (1720)

It is my understanding that some backbenchers in the Thatcher government simply decided one day that they would vote against a government motion and they told the cabinet so. They also told the cabinet: "We do not want to defeat the government. We just want to defeat this bill. If when the bill is defeated it is immediately followed by a confidence motion, we will support the government". As one British commentator put it: "After 300 years the backbenchers in the British Parliament finally figured out the importance of one simple mathematical fact: that there were more of them".

In a democratic chamber in which decisions are ultimately made by counting heads that fact ought to count for something. We say let not the rank and file members of this House take 300 years to figure out that there are more of us here than there are members of the executive and aspirants to cabinet positions. Let us make that fact count for something in the 35th Parliament.

I do not want to sound radical like William Lyon Mackenzie, but I say: Backbenchers of the House unite, unite behind the principle of freer votes. You have nothing to lose but the shackles of excessive party discipline.

Time does not permit me to elaborate on the contributions which greater use of referendums and citizens' initiatives could make to enhancing the credibility of Parliament and providing this House with a clearer sense of direction on critical issues at critical times. Suffice it to say that the country needs a full blown referendum law that permits regular consultation of the public by national referendum, the results of which would be binding on the government of the day.

Reformers propose that at each federal election Canadians get two ballots, not just one. On one ballot voters would mark their choice for a member of Parliament; on the other, a national referendum ballot, electors would vote on four or five major issues.

Because Canadians do not trust governments always to frame referendum questions fairly or to permit referendums on issues of greatest concern to the public, citizens should have the right to force a question or to initiate a question on to a referendum ballot if 3 per cent or more of the total electorate were prepared to sign a citizens' initiative petition.

One major reason we support the motion before the House is that its concluding paragraph directs the standing committee to examine ways and means to incorporate the results of referendums and citizens' initiatives into the legislative acts and decisions of the House. Anything which enhances the capacity of the House to respond to public direction will increase the credibility of Parliament and the trust of Canadians in this institution.

Finally I want to touch on the institution of recall. The third step the House needs to take toward a more truly democratic and accountable Parliament for the 21st century is the initiative in proposing a mechanism for the recall of its own members if members completely lose the confidence of those who have sent them here.

Chapter II of the standing orders, in particular Standing Orders 20, 21 and 23, provides for the House to exercise at least some discipline over its members with respect to their conduct, their election, their right to hold a seat and unacceptable behaviour, such as the acceptance of bribes. The spirit of Chapter II would be given some substance if Parliament were to pass a law enabling the electors themselves to discipline their members for unacceptable behaviour or consistent failure to represent constituents' interests.

There have been primitive experiments with recall mechanisms in this country in the past, mostly at the provincial level by at least three different political parties: the old Progressive Party, the Social Credit Party and the CCF, which was of course the predecessor to the NDP. While none of these primitive experiments was successful they provide valuable lessons from which modern parliamentarians could learn in designing an effective recall mechanism.

For example, the recall provisions used by the old Progressive Party and by the CCF were for the most part incorporated into party constitutions and procedures, not into public laws. They were in essence private contracts between a member and a small number of voters, usually the party executive or membership in the member's riding. These recall mechanisms were subject to abuse mainly by ambitious members of the MP's own party and brought the mechanism into disrepute.

• (1725)

The recall mechanism utilized in Alberta in 1936 to which the Prime Minister directed the attention of the House the other day was incorporated into a public law, but it too had its defects. In this case the law was too easily opened to abuse by opposition parties and interest groups. For example it contained no provision prohibiting the purchase of signatures for a recall petition.