

Private Members' Hour

Mr. Peters: My hon. friend laughs; maybe he has never looked at what we call the constitution. It is not a constitution in the sense of constitutions that are written for other countries; it is a statute of Westminster given to us by the British parliament on agreement of the provinces and the federal government. It certainly does not cover many of the things a constitution should cover, which obviously would establish in the regulations for parliament the length of sessions and many of the other rules that are not written into our Standing Orders and flow only from the British practice adopted by us as being applicable to Canada.

Looking back over those precedents, Mr. Speaker, I think there has been a tendency in Canada—and at one time there was a practice—of having a throne speech and then a budget. Both debates were fixed and were held very early in the session. Only in relatively recent times have we had more than one budget in a session, and those budgets do not necessarily follow the throne speech but come at various periods during the session. To some extent they do the same thing as the throne speech; in a financial way they outline the changes of attitude of the federal government, the cabinet and the government's financial advisers.

As conditions changed oftener than once a year, we ended up with a major budget and a mini-budget. Recently we have had more than one mini-budget in one session. While that is not a bad thing, it is a change that has developed without taking anything away from the operation of parliament. In fact, it allowed parliament to know the new direction the cabinet was taking and allowed members the full right of addressing themselves to the financial matters in the budget.

If records are kept, I think it will be very clear that whenever a mini-budget has been produced all parties have been in agreement with reducing the number of days required for discussion. This has been possible by members making concessions to the government. In some instances the government may have felt that some of its own members and the opposition were being conciliatory in considering requests to shorten the speeches and the length of debate when a budget was introduced for a specific purpose that might have limited application. That cannot be true of a throne speech, however.

Major changes have taken place in the direction of this government. The government has moved from one side of the street to the other, adopting a program with which the Conservative party went to the people in the last election. Strangely, the opposition now opposes the implementation of that proposal.

● (1250)

An hon. Member: It isn't in the same form.

Mr. Peters: Of course it is not in the same form. Probably it is worse. But the people gave no mandate for this program: they rejected it. The Liberal party fought wage and price controls during the election, and the people decided to reject controls.

Mr. Howie: Then why are you giving the government a vote of confidence?

[Mr. Peters.]

Mr. Peters: The hon. member's party is showing confidence in the government. It is saying, in so many words, that the government need not give us a blueprint of its proposals, that it need not call a new session and can continue the present session. In return, the hon. member's party wants private members' hour Mondays and Tuesdays in addition to the Thursdays and Fridays private members' hour allowed in this part of the session.

The NDP say there should be a new session. The opposition has elected a new leader and it may change direction to the right, not to the left. I think the country is entitled to know what the opposition proposes, as well as what the government proposes. If both parties have redrafted their blueprints for action since the last election, the country is entitled to know. In which direction are the parties going? This point is important. It should be debated at length and, as far as I am concerned, voted on. I suggest that the opposition House leader misled his party—unintentionally, because he does not understand what he proposes. Perhaps, on reflection, he and his party will reconsider the proposal. I suggest it runs counter to their philosophy and therefore ought to be reconsidered.

A speech from the throne allows the government to state its position and also allows the opposition parties to set out their positions and criticize government policy. As a rule, the speech from the throne reflects the government's assessment of the situation only a short time ahead. In my opinion, it should look no more than one year into the future. Originally, it applied only to the next two or three months. As I say, it should cover no more than the following year. The opposition has the right to make counter-proposals. Certainly the Conservative party would want to do this at an early date.

The throne speech, apart from allowing the government to tell the country what it intends to do, gives rise to debate in which backbenchers can voice the problems of their constituents. Not for a long time have backbenchers been given this opportunity. At one time backbenchers were given many opportunities for raising the problems of their constituencies. I can remember many fruitful debates on the estimates, sometimes lasting several months, in which private members could speak about the problems of their constituencies. Those debates were wide-ranging. There was a grievance period connected with committee of supply proceedings when backbenchers could raise grievances. I am sure many hon. members would welcome the opportunity to voice the concerns of their constituents and to comment on forthcoming legislation. They will be denied that opportunity unless we decide to begin a new session.

All the machinery for beginning a new session is in being. The Governor General is well, the necessary functionaries are available, the Queen's Printer's department has been enlarged, and speech writers have been hired. No doubt the speech from the throne would be interesting. In recent years it has been the practice of the government to print, along with the speech from the throne, background documents setting out the government's philosophical position. We need to know the government's philosophical position.

The Conservative party and my party were intrigued that certain statements made recently over the broadcast