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House of Commons Debates

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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Wednesday, March 21, 2001

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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OFFICIAL REPORT

At page 1941 of *Hansard*, March 20, the name Kraft Sloan appearing in the right-hand column under the nays listing for Division No. 21 should be deleted.

At page 1960 of *Hansard*, March 20, the name Bakopanos should have appeared under the yeas listing for Division No. 35.

At page 1957, in the left column, under the heading “Interim Supply”, the text should read as follows:

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for Infrastructure, Lib.) moved:

That a sum not exceeding \$16,343,875,327.99 being composed of:

(1) three twelfths (\$7,984,390,230.25) of the total of the amounts of the items set forth in Schedule 1 of the Main Estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2002, which were laid upon the Table Tuesday, February 27, 2001, and except for those items below:

(2) eleven twelfths of the total of the amount of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Votes 15 and L35, National Defence Vote 10, Privy Council Vote 55 and Treasury Board Vote 5 (Schedule 1.1) of the said Estimates, \$1,072,174,369.75;

(3) ten twelfths of the total of the amount of Privy Council Votes 30 and 35 (Schedule 1.2) of the said Estimates, \$21,794,166.67;

(4) nine twelfths of the total of the amount of Industry Vote 70 and Parliament Vote 10 (Schedule 1.3) of the said Estimates, \$42,884,250.00;

(5) eight twelfths of the total of the amount of Agriculture and Agri-Food Vote 10 (Schedule 1.4) of the said Estimates, \$539,631,333.33;

(6) seven twelfths of the total of the amount of Canadian Heritage Vote 65, Fisheries and Oceans Vote 10, and Human Resources Development Vote 20 (Schedule 1.5) of the said Estimates, \$52,309,308.34;

(7) six twelfths of the total of the amount of Canadian Heritage Vote 15, Indian Affairs and Northern Development Vote 5, and Natural Resources Vote 25 (Schedule 1.6) of the said Estimates, \$213,990,500.00;

(8) five twelfths of the total of the amount of Canadian Heritage Vote 60, Finance Vote 15, Health Vote 5, Indian Affairs and Northern Development Vote 15, Industry Votes 105 and 115, Justice Vote 1, Solicitor General Vote 5, and Transport Votes 1 and 20 (Schedule 1.7) of the said Estimates, \$3,338,571,333.33;

(9) four twelfths of the total of the amount of Agriculture and Agri-Food Vote 25, Canadian Heritage Votes 20, 35 and 45, Citizenship and Immigration Vote 10, Finance Vote 30, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Votes 25 and 45, Health Vote 1, Human Resources Development Vote 5, Indian Affairs and Northern Development Votes 35 and 40, Industry Vote 40, Public Works and Government Services Votes 1, 10 and 15, and Treasury Board Vote 2 (Schedule 1.8) of the said Estimates, \$2,431,740,586.32;

(10) three twelfths (\$646,389,250.00) of the total of the amounts of the items set forth in Schedule 2 of the Main Estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2002, which were laid upon the Table Tuesday, February 27, 2001;

be granted to Her Majesty on account of the fiscal year ending March 31, 2002.

The House of Commons Debates are also available on the Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire at the following address:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, March 21, 2001

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

• (1400)

[*English*]

The Speaker: As is our practice on Wednesday we will now sing O Canada, and we will be led by the hon. member for Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore.

[*Editor's Note: Members sang the national anthem*]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

HOUSING

Mr. Peter Adams (Peterborough, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, through the supporting community partnerships and \$305 million, the federal government is assisting community groups with problems of homelessness. The government pays 50% of project costs, matched by local money, volunteers and time. In Peterborough, this amounts to almost half a million dollars.

Equally important, the government is working to help the homeless directly. For example, in Peterborough various federal programs have supported the John Howard Society and its work for unemployed youth. The CMHC works with it providing permanent and temporary shelter, and the federal co-ops and the first nations groups continue their fine work.

As another example, HRDC has been able to assist with forums on homelessness and with a local housing resource centre.

Homelessness is not simply a matter of lack of shelter. Of course every person should have a roof over his or her head, but while

providing shelter we should work hard to solve the various problems that cause people to live on the streets. Let us continue to make this a national priority.

* * *

SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Ms. Val Meredith (South Surrey—White Rock—Langley, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, Senator Max Baucus of Montana, who has led the attack on the Canadian softwood lumber industry, now claims that lax Canadian forestry practices and environmental protection amount to a subsidy for Canadian producers.

Canada does not have to take a back seat to anyone in the world in forest management. Unlike their American counterparts, our foresters can actually light a controlled fire without burning the entire state of New Mexico. Did anyone hear Senator Baucus object when imported Canadian firefighters spent last summer saving the forests in his home state?

As for the environment, not only does British Columbia contain designated parkland that is almost the size of the entire state of Montana, we have many species of wildlife, which have been driven to extinction in the American west. If Senator Baucus is truly concerned about endangered species, perhaps he should try—

The Speaker: The hon. member for London West.

* * *

• (1405)

SUMMER GAMES

Mrs. Sue Barnes (London West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this August the cities of London, St. Thomas and Woodstock, along with the village of Grand Bend and the University of Western Ontario, will hold the first Canada Summer Games of the new millennium.

It is expected that 5,000 athletes, coaches, managers and technical officials from 650 different Canadian communities will take part in the summer games. They will compete as members of 13 teams representing our 10 provinces and three territories. We will welcome Nunavut for the first time into the Canada games family.

In full collaboration with a number of partners, including the Government of Canada, and building on the experience of previous

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game hosts and the community itself, the London Alliance will advance the Canada games legacy of building Canadian unity, fostering personal excellence through sport and enriching community life.

I would like to wish all involved the best and to congratulate them on their hard work and preparation. I welcome Canadians to London, Ontario, and different venues in my region.

* * *

NOROUZ

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Norouz, which means new day, marks the beginning of the Iranian New Year, celebrated on March 21. Norouz has always begun precisely with the passing of the sun into the vernal equinox and marks the arrival of spring.

Historically, Norouz was introduced and celebrated by an ancient Persian emperor, Jamshid. Others have credited the Achaemenid Persian dynasty in 12 BC for the festival. Today it is celebrated as New Year's Day by millions of Canadians, regardless of their religious beliefs. Iranian, Afghani, Parsi, Ismaili and other communities all celebrate it.

There is much we can learn from such an ancient and wonderful tradition still celebrated after 3,000 years. Joy and happiness were always regarded as major forces defeating the hostile spirits and Norouz has always been considered a time of change and renewal.

This day of celebration forms part of the heritage of millions of Canadians of many cultures. Perhaps March 21 should be called Norouz Heritage Day. Let me say happy new year to everyone and invite them to enjoy the festival.

* * *

*[Translation]***WORLD POETRY DAY**

Ms. Hélène Scherrer (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, UNESCO has designated today as World Poetry Day.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the great poets who have left their mark on our literary history. I am thinking of Émile Nelligan, Alain Grandbois, Saint-Denys Garneau, Anne Hébert, and Marie-Claire Blais, to name just a few.

This is the perfect opportunity for us to rediscover this art, this creative way with words. I urge everyone to renew their acquaintance with our poets. Their poetry has marked our history and continues to mark the era in which we live. I urge people to discover or rediscover their poems—and laugh, cry, reminisce and reflect.

I would also like to take this opportunity to encourage Canadians to express their feelings through the medium of words.

I and my colleagues hope that this day will also highlight Canadian art generally. The works of our artists help to strengthen our feeling of belonging to Canada, and our pride in who we are.

* * *

*[English]***HOUSE OF COMMONS**

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw the attention of all hon. members to a special person in our West Block post office, Mr. J.P. Leblanc. J.P. has just achieved 35 years of service on the Hill.

J.P. began his career on Parliament Hill in 1966 as a page in the House of Commons and at the same time attended school to complete his education. He then transferred to the committees and private legislation branch, during which he travelled extensively across Canada.

J.P. moved to the post office branch in 1973, where he became well respected for his courteous and friendly manner toward everyone. If he could do it all over again, would he choose to work on the Hill? J.P. says that he definitely would.

He represents the best of the many dedicated and hard-working staff who help ensure that the Parliament of Canada functions smoothly. I would like to say best wishes to J.P. and tell him that we wish him well as he continues his excellent work for the House of Commons.

* * *

SUPPLY MANAGEMENT

Mr. Murray Calder (Dufferin—Peel—Wellington—Grey, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a chicken farmer I want to commend our Liberal government for its steadfast support of supply management, a system that provides many family farms in my riding and across Canada with stability and profitability.

The stable environment provided by supply management encourages investment and research into better production practices. Consumers benefit from top quality chicken, eggs and dairy products at a very reasonable price. Supply management works.

Canada has defended its system of supply management at the international level and won. I call upon the government to continue its support for supply management and to ensure a bright future for our family farms and the top quality products they produce.

• (1410)

[Translation]

WORLD POETRY DAY

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in 1999 UNESCO designated March 21 as World Poetry Day, a day on which to give fresh recognition to international poetry movements.

Although there are many forms of artistic expression, painting, song, film, photography, writing, sculpting with clay, everyone would agree that there is no art without poetry, as the celebrated French painter Eugène Delacroix was so fond of saying.

One of the ways in which culture is expressed is through words. Poetry is one of the mediums available to us for expressing who we are, what we are experiencing and feeling, and particularly what we wish to become.

Who better than our poets to illustrate the truth of this? Gilles Vigneault captured it very well:

Avec nos mots, nos jeux, nos travaux et nos danses
 Nos joies et nos chagrins aussi
 Quatre cents ans de foi, d'amour et d'espérance
 Avec ceux qui vivaient ici
 Nos miroirs et nos différences
 Nous sommes devenus ce peuple et ce pays.

* * *

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The day was created to raise public awareness and to overcome racism in all of its forms. It enables us to change a page of our history and move forward from the centuries of conflict and suffering caused by racism and intolerance throughout the world.

Despite the fact that countries everywhere admire Canada for the open-mindedness and respect Canadians have for each other, we still need to continue to take steps against racism.

Laws may have changed, but the battle is not yet won. One need only think of the aboriginal people and visible minorities to realize this.

I call upon members of this House to reaffirm their convictions about the equality of all human beings and their support of Canadian multiculturalism.

* * *

FRENCH CULTURE

Mr. John Williams (St. Albert, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, French culture is in good health in western Canada and the residents of Legal in my riding are celebrating its richness.

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When Canadians think about the francophonie, their thoughts turn to the east and the French culture of Quebec and New Brunswick. There is, however, a flourishing culture in Canada's west, in Alberta and in Legal, Alberta, in particular.

The pride its people take toward their heritage is such that they have undertaken to make their city Canada's capital of French mural art.

Murals on French culture have begun to appear on the walls of numerous buildings. The citizens of Legal invite francophones and all Canadians to come and celebrate their heritage with them.

Bravo to the city of Legal and its murals.

* * *

[English]

MULTICULTURALISM

Mr. Stan Dromisky (Thunder Bay—Atikokan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, March 21 is International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In order to commemorate this day, the Regional Multicultural Youth Council from my riding of Thunder Bay—Atikokan has provided each member of parliament with a multicultural bow, much like the one I am wearing at the present time.

These coloured ribbons symbolize the human race and the beauty created when diverse peoples unite. This is one of the youth council's many initiatives to promote racial harmony and celebrate unity.

We must work together to make society fairer and more democratic. The government's involvement in the March 21 campaign strengthens our commitment to multiculturalism and is an acknowledgement that different races enrich our heritage.

I invite all members of the House to wear this ribbon with pride and to pledge commitment to racial equality.

* * *

MULTICULTURALISM

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, March 21 is International Day for the Elimination of Racism. On this day we in the federal NDP stand in solidarity with all people in a commitment to eliminate all forms of racism in our workplaces, communities, schools and institutions and in government and public policies.

We are part of a growing human rights movement that affirms the worth, dignity and equality of all people and recognizes that our civic, political, social and economic human rights are part of this struggle.

As we approach the world conference against racism in South Africa, we call on the federal government to take concrete steps to

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eliminate racism within Canada and internationally. For example, the government must act now to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and to bring justice to the victims of racist policies at residential schools.

• (1415)

We call on the government to eliminate the hated head tax on immigrants and provide redress for the racist head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants at the turn of the century.

* * *

[Translation]

DRUG USE IN AMATEUR SPORT

Mr. Robert Lanctôt (Châteauguay, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the conference on the use of drugs in amateur sport was held recently in Montreal. The aim of this event was to make the public aware of the very serious problems of drug use in amateur sport and to define ways to reduce the incidence.

The conclusions and recommendations of the conference were unanimous. We must start fighting this devastating epidemic now. All the participants, including the Government of Quebec and the federal government, agreed on a partnership project focusing on education, information and prevention and receiving proper funding to ensure these objectives are achieved.

The Bloc Québécois congratulates the organization on the success of this forum and more specifically Dr. Christiane Ayotte, the honorary chair of the conference and a world renowned expert in drug use in sports, of whom we are very proud.

* * *

[English]

LUMBER

Mr. John Herron (Fundy—Royal, PC): Mr. Speaker, if a Canadian softwood tree falls in the forest the Americans will be there to hear it fall.

On March 31 the softwood lumber agreement will expire and so will the maritime accord which exempts producers in the four Atlantic provinces from the quotas applied through the agreement.

As the four premiers of Atlantic Canada stated in a letter given to the Prime Minister, “failure to continue the current agreement would have a devastating impact on our region’s softwood lumber industry”.

Atlantic Canada has not been targeted in the softwood lumber war with the U.S. on every occasion since 1987. Why? Because maritime timber is sold competitively in an open market and is harvested from private, not crown, lands.

Even certain U.S. congressional leaders have said and understand that a Canadian solution to the softwood lumber issue should incorporate Canadian regional circumstances.

I urge the Government of Canada to renew the maritime accord and to hear the chorus of provincial maritime ministers, like Peter Mesheau of New Brunswick, calling for action to protect maritime softwood lumber.

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

ETHICS COUNSELLOR

Mr. Stockwell Day (Leader of the Opposition, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, yesterday a letter was released from the Grand-Mère Golf Club’s lawyers by the Prime Minister’s personal ethics trainer.

The Liberals claim that the letter, which of course was written and paid for by the Prime Minister’s former business partners, clears him. Actually it proves nothing. The only way we will get to the bottom of this Grand-Mère affair is if all of the relevant documents are released.

Why is the Minister of Industry still refusing to release the names that appear on the shareholder registry that shows who was the fourth shareholder between 1996 and 1999? Why will he not just release it?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition has been part of a demand for the ethics counsellor to investigate this matter. The ethics counsellor has done so and, as recently as yesterday, said clearly again that the Prime Minister was not in any conflict.

The Leader of the Opposition was part of a demand for the RCMP to investigate this matter. The RCMP did investigate and closed the books because there was no basis for an investigation. The Leader of the Opposition asked that the company release the names of the shareholders and, by the way, independent verification is being sought today with respect to that list. That information is forthcoming.

I say it is time for the Leader of the Opposition to get back to the real business of Canada.

Mr. Stockwell Day (Leader of the Opposition, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, to use his own phraseology, I do not want the Minister of Industry to get his shorts and his socks in a knot. I am just asking a basic question.

We never asked that these names be released by the company. We asked that the ethics trainer for the Prime Minister release from

the corporate registry the names of the shareholders. We still do not have them. Whose names were on there between 1996 and 1999? That is all we are asking.

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was not the Leader of the Opposition's shorts that he got in a knot when he got sued for \$800,000 for making sarcastic, wrong and false comments about another individual.

The gentleman talks about ethics, but it was his party that paid \$50,000 to bring about a byelection and still has not produced the money. It is that party that accepted \$70,000 from a law firm that benefited from the very suit for which the member was found guilty. The member has no room to lecture this Prime Minister on ethics, none whatsoever.

• (1420)

Mr. Stockwell Day (Leader of the Opposition, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, he is upset because he must still carry the Prime Minister's baggage on this, and that will hurt his leadership challenge. He has a leadership race to face and he is carrying some weight on his back.

[Translation]

In his public statement on his assets that were to be reported, the Prime Minister wrote that his portfolio, and I quote:

—is managed by a third party, at arm's length and in a blind trust.

If the Prime Minister had no control over his shares, why did he call his ethics counsellor in January?

[English]

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it does not matter how many times the Leader of the Opposition—Leader of the Opposition for the moment—continues to ask these kinds of questions. These kinds of questions will not save his leadership.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: Order, please. I realize and all hon. members know it is Wednesday, but that is no excuse for the bedlam that is occurring at the moment. A little order would be helpful.

Mr. Stockwell Day (Leader of the Opposition, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, we still cannot get an answer and the Prime Minister will not stand up and give an answer. Why can we not get the information? He said that the shares were in a blind trust and yet he phoned the ethics trainer in 1996 to say that the sale of the shares had not gone through.

We have been asking the same question. We just want a simple answer. Whose names were on that registry between 1996 and 1999? Answer the question.

Oral Questions

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, all the information required was provided yesterday in a letter that was tabled before the industry committee.

Let me quote from what the ethics counsellor said yesterday, less than 24 hours ago. He said:

I am satisfied that the prime minister had no personal interest at stake when he assisted the auberge in its applications before the Business Development Bank.

He went on to say that the golf course ceased to have an interest in the auberge in mid-1993 and that the Prime Minister ceased to have a financial interest in the golf course in November 1993.

Most people could understand that, even the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Stockwell Day (Leader of the Opposition, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, the question is very simple: Whose names were on the registry between 1996 and 1999?

The Prime Minister is shaking his head. He wishes this would go away. The future hopeful leader is wishing it would go away. That is a lot of baggage to carry.

The only question we are asking is whose names were on the registry between 1996 and 1999? That is all we are asking.

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, apparently the Leader of the Opposition is having great trouble with the simple, hard, disappointing reality that the Prime Minister's name was not on the registry after 1993 because he was not a shareholder.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday at the Standing Committee on Industry, when I asked the ethics counsellor if the Prime Minister was involved in negotiations to obtain payment of his shares in the Grand-Mère golf course, he clearly and distinctly replied "Oh, yes".

Does the Prime Minister admit that he was directly involved in the negotiations and that he personally ensured he would get paid for his shares in the Grand-Mère golf course?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the ethics counsellor is there to provide advice on ethical issues to all those who need to have trustees. All ministers, including the Prime Minister, have the right to consult the ethics counsellor.

So, under the circumstances, I spoke to him about my personal affairs, as ministers must do when they have problems, and it is his duty to provide advice to us.

Oral Questions

• (1425)

The ethics counsellor said that everything had been done properly and that my trustee had given him all the information and had fully co-operated, and he delivered to us a certificate confirming that everything was in order.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the ethics counsellor said that the Prime Minister was personally involved and that he had mandated his lawyer to negotiate. He added that the Prime Minister clearly had an interest in getting paid what he was owed.

Does the Prime Minister recognize, as his ethics counsellor did yesterday, that he had an interest in getting paid for his shares in the Grand-Mère golf course, and that he had a financial interest, when he was involved in negotiating what is called a “financial interest”?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we did not have shares in that company since November 1993.

Someone owed money to us and I wanted to get paid. Since I earn less than the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, who gets \$160,000 in addition to his salary as party leader and member of the House, I wanted my money back, which is perfectly normal.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Roberval.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the ethics counsellor confirmed that the Prime Minister had every interest in getting paid for his shares, and the Prime Minister has just confirmed this.

Is the Prime Minister going to admit that his personal interests were served by the business development bank loan to Auberge Grand-Mère, since the financial health of that hotel was tied to the value of the golf course, and this could not do otherwise than to help him find another purchaser?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, money was owed to me, and I had no interest whatsoever in either the golf course or the hotel. I did, however, want the money owing me to be paid. That is completely normal.

They are making accusations, but the RCMP has looked into the matter, the ethics counsellor has done the same, and the Minister of Industry has stated that I did not own shares. That should be clear to everyone.

In my opinion, when people rise in the House, when everyone says there is no conflict of interest, then—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Roberval.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we understand each other very well; that is what we have been saying from the beginning. The Prime Minister wanted to get paid.

He wanted his money when he made approaches to get help for Auberge Grand-Mère, to obtain a loan despite the unfavourable opinion of the Business Development Bank of Canada. It was in his personal interests to do so, as he just confirmed. Well, then let him take the floor and tell us otherwise.

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have always said the same thing. I have said from the start that I was owed money.

What I also said, and what people are forgetting, is that it was my duty to work to ensure that jobs were created in a riding where there was 19% unemployment.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien: This business in fact employs 50 people today, which is 20 more than in 1996. It was my duty to help create jobs in the riding of Saint-Maurice and I do not—

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Halifax.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

[English]

The Speaker: Order, please. The Chair has to be able to hear the questions and hon. members will want to hear the questions. The hon. member for Halifax has the floor.

* * *

TRADE

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Prime Minister vehemently denied that the government is selling privileged access to FTAA leaders. Let us consider carefully what the government's own tender call for corporate sponsorship said.

It advertised a sponsor leaders' welcoming reception. What do they get? They get a potential speaking opportunity. It advertised a sponsor networking breakfast to address delegates. It also advertised a keynote luncheon with priority seating and a closing reception, a networking opportunity.

• (1430)

It sounds a lot like privileged access to me, or is the government just engaging in false advertising?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I explained yesterday that we have invited Canadian business people who have major interests in all these countries to show them that they are good Canadian citizens, that they are well known in

Oral Questions

Canada, and that they are welcoming these leaders to Canada so that they can conclude they are good investors in their countries.

I think it is good public relations in the best interest of improving trade between Canada and the 33 other nations.

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish the government would be as transparent with the negotiating text as it is with its corporate access program. It is plain for all to see that access to FTAA leaders is for sale. We even know the price tag. We also know that corporations have access to the negotiating text.

My question is for the Prime Minister. How much did the corporations pay for the negotiating text, or was it just a freebie for them?

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister for International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is completely ludicrous to pretend that the business people have access to the negotiating text. As a responsible government leading these negotiations we obviously consult. We consult trade unions. We consult business. We consult universities. We consult people all over the place, but they do not have access to the special negotiation text.

I remind the House that the government stands for making these texts public as soon as possible, but we need the consensus of the rest of the Americas to do it.

* * *

ETHICS COUNSELLOR

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Calgary Centre, PC): Mr. Speaker, in *Hansard* of March 23, 1999, the Prime Minister said:

I sold the shares of that company in 1993. After that I had nothing to do with either the golf course or the hotel. . . The debt that was owed to me. . . was in the hands of a blind trust. I have nothing to do with it.

However yesterday Mr. Wilson said that the Prime Minister was implicated in the negotiations to dispose of the shares for three long years.

Was the counsellor wrong? Did he mislead the committee? What kind of blind trust allows the Prime Minister to be actively involved in negotiations?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a few weeks ago the leader of the fifth party said he would engage in a little fishing on this issue. It is time for the leader of the fifth party to recognize that the river is dry. He should take his pole and go back home. There is no more fishing on this subject.

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Calgary Centre, PC): Mr. Speaker, the carefully crafted letter of evasion tabled yesterday is most significant for what it hides. It says that a transfer of shares was approved. It carefully does not say that a transfer of shares occurred. In fact, it affirms that the so-called purchaser, Akimbo, was never listed as an owner of the shares.

What concrete proof can the Prime Minister offer the House that a transfer of shares actually occurred? If he has any proof at all of an actual transfer, will he agree to table it so that Canadians can judge the actual documents themselves?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the ethics counsellor has judged this issue. The RCMP has judged this issue and Canadians are judging this leader.

This is a leader who failed to see a conspiracy all around him with regard to his leadership, when what was really happening was foreign money was being brought into the Conservative Party. He could not see what was happening but imagines a conspiracy where none exists.

It is time for this leader to get back to the real business of Canadians, not accusations, not smear and not false and malicious innuendoes with respect to the Prime Minister.

Miss Deborah Grey (Edmonton North, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, it is funny; the weaker the point, the louder they yell. We have some pretty basic questions about the evasion and deception that is going on.

Yesterday, Howard Wilson sat through an entire committee hearing on this subject, dodging questions like a well trained seal. It was only at the very end of that meeting that he quietly slipped the committee chairman a copy of the lawyer's letter.

I would like to ask the Prime Minister or the industry minister who told Wilson what to say and when to say it.

● (1435)

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, nobody told the ethics counsellor what to say or when to say it. It is tragic that members opposite use the immunity of the House. Some say things inside the House but have no courage outside the House. Others attack civil servants, who are distinguished and doing their jobs, by abusing the immunity of the House.

This is a distinguished public servant acting in an honourable fashion, more honourable than the member who said "I will never take a pension" and then soaked it up at the first opportunity.

Miss Deborah Grey (Edmonton North, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, it is funny that the industry minister tried to slip that very letter in last night by tabling it under documents, when in fact it was a ministerial statement.

Mr. Wilson stonewalled questions from the opposition yesterday, but he answered Liberal softballs like a well rehearsed actor. Then he slipped the letter to the committee chairman after that entire section on the golf course was finished and they were on to another topic.

Oral Questions

When exactly did the Minister of Industry receive that letter, and why was it released only after Wilson was out of the hot seat?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, that presumes that getting questions from the Leader of the Opposition would put someone in the hot seat. Of course that is a presumption that no one should ever make in this place. Legal—

Miss Deborah Grey: When did you get that letter?

Hon. Brian Tobin: I am going to tell you exactly if you will listen. Legal consent was given—

The Speaker: Order, please. The minister of course will want to direct his remarks to the Chair. It does help maintain a bit of order in the House, although there is some difficulty in that regard today. The hon. Minister of Industry has the floor.

Hon. Brian Tobin: Mr. Speaker, through you, I would like to advise the House, because in fact I checked in anticipation of this question, that legal consent was given yesterday at 4.30 p.m. at the request of the ethics counsellor. The letter was faxed to his office, and he tabled it at 5.10 p.m. before the industry committee.

* * *

[Translation]

SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, distrust of globalization is growing. It is growing because just about everyone is being excluded from the discussions on the free trade area of the Americas with the exception, it appears, of the rich and famous.

Does the Minister for International Trade realize that, by giving such broad and privileged access to the huge multinationals by having them buy sponsorships, he is broadening this distrust of globalization and the current negotiations?

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister for International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to see that the members for Lac-Saint-Jean and Joliette have settled their differences and that the member for Joliette has given in to pressure by the member for Lac-Saint-Jean and taken a more negative approach to free trade and the phenomenon of globalization, which surprises me on the part of the Bloc.

Now, I can assure the House of one thing. The consultations on the summit of the Americas, the consultations we are holding on the free trade area of the Americas and the receptions sponsored by the business community will include representatives of civil society from unions, non governmental organizations and people from the—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Joliette.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, not many besides the Minister for International Trade really believe that

consultations are being held in Canada and Quebec on the free trade area of the Americas.

To get this government to listen, it costs between \$75,000 and \$1.5 million.

Does the Prime Minister not find it insulting that the big companies that pay, that have access to the government through the businessmen's forum, can have access to the summit of the Americas, whereas the premier of Quebec is excluded and cannot make himself heard?

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister for International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on March 27 we will hold an exploratory debate in this parliament on the free trade area of the Americas and on the Quebec summit.

Last week, I appeared with my colleague the Minister of Foreign Affairs before the standing committee, where the member for Joliette was himself present and where we discussed all of these matters.

To say we are listening only to the business people is irresponsible. We will also meet people from the unions, NGOs and, of course, we are consulting all of Canadian society for the benefit of these—

The Speaker: The hon. member for South Surrey—White Rock—Langley.

* * *

• (1440)

[English]

ETHICS COUNSELLOR

Ms. Val Meredith (South Surrey—White Rock—Langley, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the ethics counsellor received clearance, as he put it, to release the letter from the lawyer, coincidentally right at the end of the meeting yesterday.

However he had the letter in hand during the meeting. He even had time to have it translated and have copies made. How convenient that the ethics counsellor was instructed to release the letter at the end of the meeting. Was the tabling of the letter orchestrated by the Prime Minister or by the Minister of Industry?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): No, Mr. Speaker, there was no orchestration whatsoever, but if I had my druthers the letter would have been available first thing at that meeting.

The blunt reality is that it takes the legal consent of the partners involved and a law firm on behalf of that group to release that letter. That consent was received, because I checked this morning, at 4.30 p.m.

In response to an early request from the ethics counsellor, the letter was faxed to his office, sent across to him obviously at the committee and was tabled at the committee. There is no mystery here. It is all very straightforward.

Oral Questions

Ms. Val Meredith (South Surrey—White Rock—Langley, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I would like to know why there were cheap theatrics last night when the minister tried to interrupt and disrupt the voting for this letter.

I would like to know how it was possible for this letter to be translated and for copies to be made if it was received in the timeframe the minister gave us.

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was making the information available to the whole House at the earliest opportunity. I resent the statement that it was cheap theatrics. I thought the theatrics were fine. If it were cheap theatrics I would have been wearing a wetsuit, and I was not.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

The Speaker: Order, please. We are losing a lot of time today in question period.

* * *

[Translation]

FREE TRADE AREA OF THE AMERICAS

Ms. Francine Lalonde (Mercier, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we are still unable to find out what is on the FTAA negotiating table, and a number of concerns are being expressed.

In committee yesterday, I asked one of our witnesses, Canada's former chief negotiator for the MAI, if he thought that day care for \$5, the private not for profit network funded largely by the government, could be wiped out by the FTAA. His response was "Yes, absolutely".

Will the minister tell us whether the proposed agreement under services excludes or protects the social economy, particularly in the area of—

The Speaker: The Minister for International Trade.

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister for International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada has always protected in the past, is protecting right now and will protect in the future, as long as our government is at the helm, the room to manoeuvre of the Government of Canada and of the provinces when it comes to health and public education, as well as social services.

Ms. Francine Lalonde (Mercier, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this answer is worrying because in the Quebec model there are a number of areas in which the government has formed partnerships with the private sector and is providing it with subsidies.

Mr. Dymond's answer is extremely worrying as well. Does the minister realize that the only way of reassuring us as to the fate in store for public services, whether delivered by the government or

by the private sector, is to give us access to the negotiating texts, documents he is still keeping from us?

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister for International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada's position is very clear, and I have lost track of the number of times I have repeated it in the House. We would like to make these texts public but they are not exclusively ours. They are not the property of Canada alone. They are consolidations of positions which belong to the whole hemisphere.

Unlike the Bloc Quebecois, Canada is assuming its responsibilities. We are going to respect our partners. The Bloc Quebecois may very well say "We will not respect the rest of the hemisphere, and we are going to do as we please and publish texts which you do not wish us to publish". Our government will be responsible and will treat our partners in the rest of the hemisphere with respect.

* * *

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian dollar has dropped by half a cent again today and inflation has moved up to the top of the band allowed by the Bank of Canada. This means the bank's ability to match yesterday's U.S. interest rate cuts is very limited.

• (1445)

Economists are saying that all the burden is being placed on the shoulders of the governor of the bank to shore up our dollar and our economy. When will the finance minister finally begin to do his part by bringing in a spring budget with fiscal stimulus, that is a long term plan to pay down our debt and make our economy more competitive?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have said that we will bring in an economic update in the spring. Overwhelmingly the vast majority of economic opinion in the country says that is what is required.

The hon. member ought to know, and I will say it again for the nth time, that Canada has brought in the greatest amount of fiscal stimulus of any industrial country.

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, the minister can repeat that fantasy as often as he likes, but the reality is that we continue to have the highest income taxes in the G-7; the highest corporate income taxes in the OECD, says the OECD; and the second highest level of debt in the OECD, says the OECD. After the Bush tax cuts go through we will be losing, not gaining, ground with the Americans in terms of competitiveness.

Oral Questions

With the 63 cent dollar today and with inflation creeping up, how could the finance minister continue to keep his head in the sand? Why does he not bring in a real budget with real fiscal stimulus that saves our dollar and our economy?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, why does the finance critic for the Alliance not simply wake up and take a look at the facts? He is wrong on every instance. Our tax burden is not the highest. Our corporate taxes are lower. Our capital gains taxes are lower.

We have the largest debt reduction of any industrial country. We have created more jobs over the last four years than any industrial country.

The fact is that Canada in those areas is doing very well. Yes, there is global volatility and yes, we are concerned, but Canada is better prepared to weather that storm than any other industrial country.

* * *

MULTICULTURALISM

Mr. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, every year for the last 40 years we have been celebrating March 21. We take the cultural mosaic in Canada for granted. Could the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism elaborate for the House why it is as important as ever to continue to celebrate March 21, international day for the elimination of racism?

Hon. Hedy Fry (Secretary of State (Multiculturalism)(Status of Women), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for that question. March 21 remembers the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960 when innocent people were killed protesting apartheid.

We only have to look around the world today at Kosovo, at Macedonia and at Northern Ireland to know that people are still discriminated against in the world because of their race, their religion and their culture. We do not have to go too far.

We could just go to Prince George, British Columbia, where crosses are being burned on lawns as we speak. It is very important we recognize that race, religion and culture in this country are part of our strengths and that we must keep every day to ensure that we will—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Dartmouth.

* * *

PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Ms. Wendy Lill (Dartmouth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Industry. Monopoly booksellers have gained a stranglehold on the book industry in Canada. Yesterday we learned that more publishers were in need of emergency bailouts, were cutting titles, dumping new authors and nervously awaiting what the proposed takeover of Chapters by Indigo will mean to their fragile existence.

Will the government consider instituting a new set of rigorous cultural criteria within the Competition Act to review cultural industry mergers such as this one, criteria that will provide strong public safeguards for our writers, publishers and booksellers?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada is concerned that we maintain vibrant and dynamic cultural industries within the country, and in particular an environment that nurtures the tremendous work of Canadian authors and writers across the country.

The specific question to which the hon. member refers is now before the Competition Bureau, and as is appropriate the bureau is doing its work. It would be inappropriate for me at this juncture to try to foreshadow an outcome prior to the process being completed.

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● (1450)

PHARMACEUTICALS

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the death of Vanessa Young is deeply disturbing, made even more tragic by the fact that it may have been prevented. Vanessa died on March 19, 2000, of complications associated with Prepulsid.

On May 31, Health Canada issued a warning citing 44 reports of heart problems associated with the drug, including 10 deaths in Canada. It took Health Canada until August 7, 2000, to stop the sale of Prepulsid. How could this have happened? How many needless deaths occurred? Why was Prepulsid not pulled the minute problems associated with it first came to light?

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Charbonneau (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a coroner's inquest has been launched regarding the death to which the hon. member is referring. We must wait for the results of that inquest before dealing with all the details relating to this issue.

I should also point out that a class action suit has been filed regarding this issue. This is another reason not to make detailed comments before the House.

However, I will say that many warnings were issued to health care professionals in 1999 and 2000 regarding this—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint John.

* * *

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mrs. Elsie Wayne (Saint John, PC): Mr. Speaker, last Thursday I quoted directly from a Federal Court of Appeal judgment relating to the maritime helicopter program. At that time the Minister of National Defence stated that what I read was “not

Oral Questions

true". An attempt to table the decision was then blocked by a government member.

Is the minister now prepared to admit that he was wrong? Will he table the court decision himself? Will he finally agree with the court that there could have been political interference?

Hon. Art Eggleton (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member continues to have it all wrong. She said that the court called this patent politicization within the Department of National Defence, that the three judges said it.

That is not true at all. Certainly the citation by the people who took the case to court was to that effect, but the judges did not find that at all. They dismissed the case.

Mrs. Elsie Wayne (Saint John, PC): Mr. Speaker, the court's decision is clear. Paragraph 16 of the decision is very clear. The court raised the prospect that "the procurement procedures suffered from patent politicization within the Department of National Defence".

The minister has a duty and an obligation to ask the judge advocate general to investigate the matter. Will he commit to doing it today?

Hon. Art Eggleton (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member conveniently leaves out certain parts. I have the document here too. That is not what it says at all.

In effect, what these judges did quite clearly was dismiss the case. They said a case had not been made. There was an allegation. The case was not made. That is the end of it.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Art Hanger (Calgary Northeast, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, British army troops now training at CFB Wainwright and Suffield came from the same agricultural heartland in the United Kingdom now ravaged by foot and mouth disease.

These military units tasked with the clean up of dead animals in the United Kingdom have been exposed to this disease in extreme ways. Their clothing, equipment, food supplies, and even the soldiers themselves could very well be contaminated.

What extraordinary measures has the minister taken to protect Canada's livestock from contamination?

Hon. Art Eggleton (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian forces and the Department of National Defence have been working very closely and very co-operatively with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to make sure every-

thing is done to prevent this disease from coming into the country. Everything we could possibly do is being done.

Upon disembarkation from any aircraft passengers must be clean and disinfected including their footwear. A procedure is carried out. There is a complete procedure involved to make sure that we do everything possible to prevent that disease from coming into the country.

Mr. Art Hanger (Calgary Northeast, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, this disease is actually destroying an agricultural industry in the United Kingdom. There is a threat to any country when products, equipment or personnel leave England that could very well spread the disease quickly.

The minister's office was contacted on March 16 and seemed to know very little about what was happening to this end. There is a potential arrival of troops coming from England in the next few weeks, or they may be on their way now. I am asking the minister what steps—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of National Defence.

• (1455)

Hon. Art Eggleton (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do not know what the hon. member does not understand about it. I have made it very clear that there is a procedure in place. We are ensuring disinfection is carried out thoroughly to make sure we do everything possible to prevent the disease from coming into the country.

If we have to prevent aircraft or people from coming here to make sure of that, we will do that as well. We are making sure that there is a thorough disinfection of any aircraft coming from the U.K. or anywhere else.

* * *

[Translation]

FREE TRADE AREA OF THE AMERICAS

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it was the government's intention to negotiate related agreements on the environment with its partners in the free trade area of the Americas.

However, Latin American countries are opposed to linking trade and the environment, while the United States supports the idea. As for Canada, it remains silent.

If the environment is a government priority, could the minister inform us of Canada's position and tell us what he intends to do regarding the environment in the FTAA negotiations?

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister for International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is well aware that several countries from the southern hemisphere feel that including the

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environment in a free trade agreement is an indirect way of engaging in protectionism, of keeping southern countries behind and of imposing on them a way of doing things that slows down their economic development.

We feel that, through trade, we must allow these countries to improve their access to the global economy, thus strengthening their own economic development. However, we must also make progress regarding the environment as well as labour standards. We want.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Berthier—Montcalm.

* * *

DRUG LEGALIZATION

Mr. Michel Bellehumeur (Berthier—Montcalm, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is believed that at the Summit of the Americas Uruguay may raise the issue of drug legalization. In fact, Mexico's president, Vicente Fox, feels that legalization is the only way to lead an effective international war against organized crime, as it relates to the trade of illicit drugs.

Could the Minister of Justice tell us whether Canada intends to support the approach advocated by the Mexican president?

[English]

Hon. Anne McLellan (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I can inform the House that at this time the government has no plans to legalize the possession of marijuana. The hon. member knows that the whole issue around drug enforcement is a complex one. It is a health issue. It is a legal issue. It is an international law issue. It is a law enforcement issue.

I wish there were simple and easy answers to this question. Canada's approach again reflects the balance that is required. It is an integrated approach, working both internationally and domestically, treating it not only as an issue of law enforcement but as an issue of health treatment.

* * *

CANADIAN FORCES

Mr. Leon Benoit (Lakeland, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, when the Liberals were elected in 1993 the Canadian forces consisted of 90,000 members. An internal document states that the military now faces a significant shortfall below the government commitment of 60,000 and still dropping.

Will the minister tell the House today, first, how many members there are in the Canadian forces on the active list? Second, what will Canada's military needs be in terms of personnel over the next five years?

Hon. Art Eggleton (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the defence white paper of 1994 calls for 60,000 regular

force troops, plus a number of other civilians and a number of others in the reserve force. We intend to continue to work toward that level and try to maintain that level.

We have a shortage now because of attrition. We are in fact going on a recruitment campaign to make up those numbers.

Mr. Leon Benoit (Lakeland, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, the minister's answer conflicts with a recent study which said that in fact Canada's military is now 4,000 short, but it will be a startling 17,000 members short by the end of 2002 if the current trend continues.

The minister will go down in history as the man responsible for killing Canada's military through funding cuts, through delayed equipment replacement, and now through a critical shortage of personnel. Is the reason for this critical loss in personnel the weakness of the minister, or is it a deliberate plan on the part of the government to destroy Canada's military?

Hon. Art Eggleton (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has his numbers all wrong, as he usually does. He is extrapolating very extreme cases where there is no intention of the government to see that happen at all.

The government has made a very clear commitment that we want to make sure we keep the Canadian forces in a position where they are able to contribute to international peace and security and to carry out the will of the government and the people of this country in their desire to create peace and security in the world. We will continue to do that. We will continue to follow the white paper defence policy of parliament.

* * *

● (1500)

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Gurbax Malhi (Bramalea—Gore—Malton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that Canada had decided to restore formal relations with India.

Why has the Government of Canada changed its policy and announced a re-engagement with India? What does the announcement mean for Canada-India relations?

Hon. Rey Pagtakhan (Secretary of State (Asia-Pacific), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question. Canada's re-engagement with India recognizes the fact that a better climate now exists which allows us to pursue an effective dialogue for all aspects of our relationship.

Canada is committed to pursuing the broadest political, cultural and economic relationship with India. We will continue to call upon India to renounce its nuclear weapons program.

Points of Order

Moreover, re-engagement through full ministerial visits and full restoration of CIDA programming, as well as support for cultural exchanges, will enrich our political relationship.

* * *

AGRICULTURE

Mr. Werner Schmidt (Kelowna, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the minister of agriculture. For three consecutive years B.C. fruit growers have suffered setbacks on the basis of hail, heat stress and the collapse of their export market in the last year. NISA helps a few. AIDA does not help them at all.

The minister of agriculture knows that B.C. fruit growers are in an emergency situation which requires special action. What is the minister prepared to do to deal with the emergency situation?

Hon. Lyle Vanclief (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with the support of crop insurance, NISA and the Canadian farm income program last week, the province of British Columbia will get its portion of the \$500 million.

It will add its 40% to that in order to assist producers according to the way the provincial government wishes to direct those funds. That will certainly be there to help the producers to which the hon. member refers.

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PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of His Excellency Tomas Duenas, Minister of Foreign Trade for Costa Rica.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

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● (1505)

POINTS OF ORDER

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton Centre-East, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I believe my moment of atonement has arrived. I am referring to my recent standing order transgression for which I apologize not only to you, Mr. Speaker, but also to the House and to the nation whose interests I serve.

While certainly I meant no disrespect in my action, all infractions of order do have consequences. In the House, even minor infractions are potentially serious in their longer term effects.

Parliament's rules are to be respected because they are written by all, for all.

I hereby submit my person to the penance of the Chair, and ask for leniency and appeal for clemency under the circumstances. I certainly do not stand here to challenge, nor do I seek changes to, the rules. My hope is to be forgiven by the Chair, before the witnesses in the House, and in front of my colleagues. The essence of the House is honour. I would never intentionally dishonour the House or its procedures.

The Speaker: Of course the Chair is anxious to forgive any transgressions that hon. members make, but I want to draw to the attention of all hon. members the provision in our rules that deals with the recognition of visitors in the gallery.

On page 239 of Marleau and Montpetit, which I know almost everyone keeps under his or her pillow, it states:

Only from the Speaker's gallery can distinguished visitors (such as heads of state, heads of government and parliamentary delegations invited to Canada) be recognized and introduced to the House by the Speaker.

On page 278 of the same work, it states:

During a sitting, the Speaker may draw the attention of the House to the presence of distinguished visitors seated in the gallery of the House. Generally, this takes place immediately following Question Period, though the Speaker has also recognized visitors prior to Question Period and even during Question Period.

I will not read all that at length but I do refer hon. members to the footnote on page 278, footnote 166, which states:

Other Members who have attempted to direct the attention of the House to the presence of visitors have been ruled out of order.

There are various examples cited but I will not bore the House with the dates. It also states:

It has also happened that the practice has been departed from.

It has been departed from on occasion. The hon. member for Edmonton Centre-East did depart from the practice on one occasion. I indicated that he had incurred the displeasure of the Chair. He is now back in the pleasure of the Chair and I am sure the whole House is grateful for his withdrawal.

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester, PC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced in London, England a fundamental change in foreign policy for Canada. In question period today the parliamentary secretary confirmed it to members of the House of Commons.

No advance notice was given to members of parliament and no notification was given to the foreign affairs committee. It continues to be the ongoing practice to notify the media before notifying members of parliament.

Privilege

I take objection to this and, if you, Mr. Speaker, find a bona fide breach of privilege, I am prepared to move the appropriate motion to discontinue this practice.

The Speaker: I must say to the hon. member that ministers make speeches here, there and everywhere, and so do hon. members. Some of us travel and make speeches in some places and there is always the risk that there might be an announcement in one of our speeches about something or other that is not made in the House first.

I do not want the point of order I dealt with the other day to be misconstrued. It was quite specific and dealt with a press conference held before the introduction of a bill that was to be tabled in the House. However statements by ministers can be made outside the House, and have been made outside the House, and have not incurred the displeasure of the Chair.

I know the hon. member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough is an expert on the subject. He has raised these kind of points frequently in the House. Perhaps he and the member for Cumberland—Colchester can consult on the point because I think the member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough is thoroughly familiar with the views of the Chair on the issue. I have ruled on several of his points of order already and I do not think there is a question of privilege or a point of order in the issue raised today.

• (1510)

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

Mr. Richard Harris (Prince George—Bulkley Valley, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, during question period the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, a person well-known for her intolerance of anyone who does not agree with her point of view, made a vicious comment by saying that if people want to know about racism and hatred they should go to British Columbia.

She further went on to say they are burning crosses in Prince George as we speak.

Prince George is where I have lived for more than 40 years. My colleague, the hon. member for Prince George—Peace River, represents the good, decent, honest people of that city. It is revolting that the minister would cast such vicious and mean-spirited aspersions on the people of Prince George, British Columbia.

I ask that the minister be called on to withdraw the statement and to apologize to the House, to the people of Prince George and, indeed, to all Canadians for such a vicious comment.

Hon. Don Boudria (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the secretary of state of course has spoken extensively on issues of racism.

Some hon. members: Yes, she has.

Hon. Don Boudria: Yes, she has probably been a victim of intolerance. She has spoken about the issue at length.

I will endeavour to reach her later this afternoon. As we speak, she is making an announcement about racism before a group of Canadians of various ethnic origins. As soon as that is completed, I will attempt to have her return to the House to respond to what the hon. member has raised.

The Speaker: It is clear the minister is not here to answer the question raised by the hon. member. The Chair will review the blues. The government House leader has given an undertaking in respect to the minister's presence. We will leave the issue at that. We cannot do anything else at this point. We will wait to hear later.

Mrs. Elsie Wayne (Saint John, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again today I referred to the Federal Court of Appeal's decision with regard to the replacement of the EH-101, and the minister referred to it as well.

Therefore I would ask for the right to table the document to show that the quotes I gave in the House during question period were accurate and correct.

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent to allow the hon. member to table the document?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

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PRIVILEGE

ETHICS COUNSELLOR

Mr. Chuck Strahl (Fraser Valley, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, my question of privilege is in regard to another case where the media was given preferential treatment of information intended for parliamentarians.

I would also argue that the timing of the release of the information resulted in impeding the work of members of parliament.

My question of privilege charges the ethics counsellor with contempt of parliament for releasing information in a way that impeded members of the industry committee and of the House. The Minister of Industry tabled the same information in the House after the media had an opportunity to examine it. This contempt occurred yesterday.

While I recognize that the Speaker is reluctant to intervene in a committee matter, the circumstances in this case are extraordinary and have a direct link to the proceedings of the House.

Joseph Maingot's *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada*, on page 70, defines a proceeding in parliament:

Since two of Parliament's constituent elements, the House of Commons and the Senate, were established for the enactment of laws, those events necessarily incidental

Privilege

to the enactment of laws are part of the "proceedings in Parliament". However, Parliament has also always been a forum to receive petitions, and the Crown's satisfying the grievances of members before granting supply eventually led to straightforward requests for information. Therefore, the events necessarily incidental to petitions, questions, and notices of motions in Parliament in the seventeenth century and today are all events which are part of "proceedings in Parliament".

Mr. Maingot went on to say:

Privilege of Parliament is founded on necessity, and is those rights that are "absolutely necessary for the due execution of its powers." Necessity then should be a basis for any claim that an event was part of a "proceeding in Parliament," i.e., what is claimed to be part of a "proceeding in Parliament" and thus protected should be necessarily incidental to a "proceeding in Parliament."

• (1515)

On page 72 of a 1939 report from the Select Committee on the Official Secrets Act, it states:

—a proceeding in Parliament covers both the asking of a question and the giving written notice of such a question.

The House has been seeking for two years, through the daily question period, evidence regarding the Prime Minister's stake in 161341 Canada Inc. The Minister of Industry promised members of the House that the information was coming. The appearance of the ethics counsellor at the Standing Committee on Industry yesterday was used as a follow up to the questions in the House and to the promise given by the industry minister.

The Leader of the Opposition asked the ethics counsellor:

Will the Corporations Directorate be communicating to the minister, and to you, the name of any fourth shareholder, whether it's Jonas Prince, whether it's the Prime Minister himself, whether it's some other person? Will they actually be communicating that to you so that the House can determine if the Prime Minister had a conflict of interest or not?

To which the ethics counsellor replied:

I expect that the Corporations Directorate will be responding to my letter. I'm not sure exactly when that will take place. But what my intention is, as I indicated to you in my interim reply, once I have that in hand, I will be responding directly to you and I am quite confident that will remove any lingering uncertainties.

Mr. Speaker, in the dying minutes of that committee meeting, after the ethics counsellor was finished as a witness—and you will find this in the last line of the minutes of the committee meeting—he tabled with the chairman the letter he claimed he would give to the Leader of the Opposition directly when he had it in hand. The ethics counsellor then marched over to the media, released the letter to the media and conducted interviews regarding the same letter.

That information should have been tabled as soon as he had it and it should have been part of the proceedings of that meeting. He had promised the Leader of the Opposition earlier that the moment he had it he would give it to the Leader of the Opposition but he

withheld that information. It was contemptuous when he had that, not to have delivered what was asked of him. It was useless for the committee to release it at the very end when the questioning was over. It was as if he attempted to meet the criteria on some purely technical basis on the notion that the letter should have been tabled with members before the media.

However I would argue that what the ethics counsellor did was essentially give the media the first opportunity to scrutinize the letter and to do an interview with him. This was an indirect act that impeded the committee. The entire time the questioning was going on he withheld that critical information about what was in the letter which dealt with the question that the Leader of the Opposition had put to him.

Erskine May describes contempt as:

—any act or omission which obstructs or impedes either House of Parliament in the performance of its functions, or which obstructs or impedes any Member or officer of such House in the discharge of his duty, or which has a tendency, directly or indirectly, to produce such results may be treated as a contempt even though there is no precedent of the offence.

When the Minister of Industry tabled the letter in the House later, he too was guilty of contempt when he promised he would deliver it the moment he had it.

On March 20, the Speaker ruled that:

With respect to material to be placed before parliament, the House takes precedence. . . . To deny to members information concerning business that is about to come before the House, while at the same time providing such information to media that will likely be questioning members about that business, is a situation that the Chair cannot condone. . . . I have concluded that this constitutes a *prima facie* contempt of the House.

I would argue that an act that has the same results as what you pointed out in your ruling is also contempt. This is what the authorities on parliamentary procedure would have us believe.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that you examine the committee minutes. The committee was divided into two parts: a question and comment period about the ethics counsellor and his role as the ethics counsellor, and a meeting concerning the Lobbyists Registration Act.

Mr. Speaker, as you go through those minutes you will find there is nothing about the letter that he tabled at the end of the meeting. There are no comments and no questions because we did not know the letter existed, even though he obviously had it in the pocket of his jacket.

Mr. Speaker, if you read the papers this morning you will see much discussion on the details of that letter but once again the media came before parliamentarians.

Privilege

• (1520)

The House did not see the letter until much later that same day. The ethics counsellor may not report to directly to parliament but he has now put himself in a situation where parliament must deal with him directly.

The ethics counsellor must be held accountable for his actions. He knew full well that he had the letter in his pocket. He denied that information to the Leader of the Opposition when he was asked directly when that information would be available. He denied he had it. He said he would make it available as soon as it was in his possession. It was in the pocket of his jacket the entire time. He denied information to members of parliament that was germane to the subject matter and critical for us to do our job. He is in contempt of parliament.

I would ask, Mr. Speaker, that you find a prima facie case against him and I am prepared to move the appropriate motion.

Ms. Susan Whelan (Essex, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as chair of the Standing Committee on Industry I wish to clarify exactly what took place at committee yesterday afternoon.

The meeting continued on after the first round of questions. During the second round there were questions about the Lobbyist Registration Act. During that time period, at approximately 5.12 p.m., Mr. Wilson notified me that he had just received a letter in both English and French. I thought, mistakenly, and the blues will show, that it was from Industry Canada. I suggested that Mr. Wilson should speak to it in between the questioning of witnesses by the member for Burlington and the member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough.

During that time period Mr. Wilson explained that he did not want to be excessively dramatic. He had just been given clearance to give the committee a letter. It was an original in French, with translations from Pierre Paquette, the lawyer that represents the golf club, who has written to Industry Canada. He apologized that it was not available earlier but there it was. He hoped that the representatives would get it to their party leaders.

The committee then continued for approximately 15 minutes during which time no one raised the question of the letter. If we go back, the earlier comment was with regard to the corporations directorate. This is a different letter from the lawyer for the corporation.

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was not at the committee meeting. I am not sure whether the official opposition House leader was either, but I just wanted to say on the matter that it does seem to me a bit odd that this letter should have been released at the time that it was to the committee.

I have heard conflicting reports as to whether or not the ethics counsellor may or may not have had the letter on his person all the time that he was there, or whether he received it some time later in the meeting, as the chairman of the committee contends and as I heard from someone else.

It does not really matter whether or not he actually had it on him when he was answering the Leader of the Opposition or whether he received it later, although if he had it on him it sort of compounds the problem.

Given the preoccupation of the House with this issue, and it is not always a preoccupation that those of us in my party have been able to share because we have decided to devote our few questions to other issues, I have listened carefully to what has gone on between various opposition members and the government on this.

I have to say that this is the first time, given the behaviour of the ethics counsellor yesterday in the committee with respect to the release of the letter, I have had an inkling or a feeling that perhaps the ethics counsellor was more than just a guy caught in a very difficult situation, trapped by the limits of his mandate, by the limits of whom he appoints, whom he reports to, who appointed him, and by the limits of the current conflict of interest guidelines the Prime Minister and others operate within.

Until yesterday it never occurred to me that the ethics counsellor might actually be acting in a way that was favourable to one side or the other of the argument. However, I have to say I think the ethics counsellor owes the House an explanation at this point. I am still not prepared to say that he was taking sides, but it sure looks like it when he released that letter at the point in time in the life of that committee meeting when he did.

• (1525)

I would think that an explanation should be forthcoming from the ethics counsellor and, if there is not an appropriate explanation, it may well be that he was acting in contempt of the House.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with great interest to the point that has been raised by the hon. House leader for the official opposition. I have also listened to the input of other members.

I was present at the committee. As the chair of the committee has indicated, it was just before I was to commence my line of questioning that I noticed Mr. Wilson conferring with someone I presumed to be a staff person, and then pre-empting the committee by the statement. I can verify that it was along the lines, as the chair of the committee said, that he did not mean to be dramatic or overly dramatic, and then he proceeded to divulge the contents or the gist of the letter.

It is important to note that as indicated previously there were two distinct points in time in which members of the committee were

Routine Proceedings

permitted to ask questions on a certain subject matter, namely the Grand-Mère file. That was limited by the chair of the committee and it was directly related to the Shawinigan-Grand-Mère file to which this letter pertained.

Most of the main questioners on the particular subject matter had left by the time the letter was divulged. If they were present or if members of the committee generally wanted to question the witness at that time about the letter, I strongly suggest that we would not have been permitted to in any event, given the parameters that were placed on the committee by the chair. The timing is highly suspect.

The Speaker: I have heard a fair bit on this point. What is apparent at this point, from everything that I have heard, is that this is a matter relating to the proceedings in this committee.

There is no question that there were proceedings ongoing in this committee. No one has denied that the committee meeting was taking place. It now appears that everyone says the letter was produced during that meeting. Whether or not it was discussed, whether it was made public, whether it was tabled, or whether there was some allegation of wrongdoing, is a matter surely for the industry committee to decide.

I must say that at the conclusion of the remarks of the hon. House leader for the official opposition I thought it was an excellent presentation to make before the committee chair. The matter has to be dealt with, with great respect to hon. members, in the committee and not here in the House.

I have not heard a thing that suggests there has been a breach of the privileges of the House itself. There may have been something go wrong in the committee, but until the committee reports to the House and has dealt with the issue, and it has not met since, as I understand it, we are at a bit of an impasse here.

Could I suggest we leave the issue at this point and have the industry committee deal with it, because that is where the matter ought to be raised, at least in a preliminary way. It appears to me that it has not been raised there.

Until there has been some decision by the committee, and it may wish to hear more testimony on the issue, it is premature for me to interfere in any way. Indeed, as hon. members know, it is very unusual for the Chair to involve itself in committee proceedings anyway. I believe that this is a matter that should be dealt with there and I respectfully request hon. members to raise the issue in the industry committee at this point.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker,

pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to three petitions.

* * *

[*English*]

INCOME TAX AMENDMENTS ACT, 2000

Hon. Jim Peterson (for the Minister of Finance) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-22, an act to amend the Income Tax Act, the Income Tax Application Rules, certain acts related to the Income Tax Act, the Canada Pension Plan, the Customs Act, the Excise Tax Act, the Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act and another act related to the Excise Tax Act.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

● (1530)

INDIAN ACT

Mr. Leon Benoit (Lakeland, Canadian Alliance) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-307, an act to amend the Indian Act (election of chiefs and councils).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am indeed delighted to introduce this bill which would ensure that Elections Canada monitors elections of chiefs and councils on reserves right across the country. Many people who live on reserves have expressed to me a concern about the elections of chiefs and councils on their reserves. All the bill would do is ensure that elections would be fair and votes would be respected, and it would do so in a logical way by having Elections Canada monitor the elections.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

PETITIONS

CANADA POST

Mr. Janko Perić (Cambridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36 I have the privilege to present to the House a petition with some 30 signatures from concerned citizens. The petition is to draw to the attention of parliament the fact that rural route mail couriers have not been allowed to bargain collectively to improve their wages and working conditions.

Since workers who deliver mail in cities have collective bargaining rights, the petitioners request that parliament repeal section 13(5) of the Canada Post Corporation Act to permit rural mail couriers to bargain collectively, like urban mail workers.

Routine Proceedings

POISON CONTROL

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I have in hand a petition with several hundred names of individuals from across Saskatchewan.

Farmers across the province of Saskatchewan want the federal government to give them the necessary tools to fight a severe infestation of gophers. The petition is calling on the federal government to amend regulations to permit the sale of concentrated liquid strychnine to registered farmers until an effective alternative can be found.

Gophers are destroying hundreds of acres of pasture and grain land every year and, to a great extent, farmers are powerless to stop them. Crop and hay land damage caused by this infestation of gophers is very costly to the farmer in lost productivity, equipment repairs and injury to livestock.

It is the hope of these petitioners that the petition will convince the federal government to relax the restrictions on strychnine poison so that farmers can get the gopher problem under control.

We appreciate the opportunity to bring this grave and serious problem to the attention of the House.

* * *

STARRED QUESTIONS

Mr. Derek Lee (Parliamentary Secretary to Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, would you be so kind as to call Starred Question No. 9. I ask that the question and answer be printed in *Hansard* as if read.

The Speaker: Is it agreed that the question and answer be printed as read?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

*Question No. 9—**Mr. Norman Doyle:**

Regarding Fort Townshend in St. John's, Newfoundland: (a) has the Government of Canada made any representations to the government of Newfoundland regarding the preservation of the archeological integrity of Fort Townshend; and (b) does the Government of Canada support the destruction of the Fort Townshend ruins?

Mr. Derek Lee: (a) Parks Canada officials have visited the Fort Twonshend site and met with provincial officials. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador has been encouraged to consider the importance of the archaeological remains at Fort Townshend National Historic Site of Canada in the planning and construction of the new cultural and heritage facility. These actions by the federal government are consistent with the Parks Canada guiding

principles and operational policies in its application to national historic sites not administered by Parks Canada.

(b) Parks Canada encourages and supports the protection and presentation of all national historic sites, including those not administered by the agency. This position was affirmed in the national historic sites of Canada system plan announced in the fall of 2000.

[English]

Mr. Speaker, I also ask that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

Mr. Greg Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest, PC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I presume the parliamentary secretary's response is in relation to the questions I had put on the order paper last June.

Is it not? That is helpful.

I would like to point out to the House that the parliamentary secretary has been very helpful to me on a personal basis in regard to responding to a question put on the order paper last June, and subsequently put on the order paper when parliament was recalled, regarding the sale of 40 Huey helicopters. This is very important to the House, because the issue of those helicopters falling into the wrong hands in terms of Colombian terrorists and so on has been raised in the House on a number of occasions. We want those questions answered.

• (1535)

Further, last week I was attempting to get answers to these questions which have been on the order paper too long in my opinion and I think in the opinion of most members of the House. Also at that time I put on the order paper questions relating to the sale of 10 Challenger aircraft owned by the Government of Canada. These were brokered through an aviation firm called Lancaster Aviation—

The Speaker: Perhaps the hon. member could come to his point. I do not think we need to hear all the details of the questions.

Mr. Greg Thompson: Mr. Speaker, with due respect, if I do not provide details we will never know, because for some reason the government simply does not want to answer.

In addition to the question on the 40 Huey helicopters, I also had questions on the order paper going back to last June and subsequently re-entered when the new parliament resumed, on the sale of 10 Challenger aircraft by the Government of Canada through the same brokerage firm, Lancaster Aviation.

When will we get answers to that set of questions in addition to the Huey helicopters question? They are important issues. I think the Canadian people have a right to know.

Mr. Derek Lee: Mr. Speaker, to be technical, I suppose, the government will treat the two questions the hon. member has on the order paper as new questions beginning in this parliament.

I have reviewed a draft answer to one question with the hon. member. I can say that I felt the question deserved a more full response than was originally drafted. I have asked that the government do so. The member is aware of that.

The second question is in process. I am sure an answer will be forthcoming very shortly.

The Speaker: Shall the remaining questions stand?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

Mr. Derek Lee (Parliamentary Secretary to Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all Notices of Motions for the Production of Papers be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

Hon. Don Boudria (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. There have been consultations among all parties in the House, and I believe you would find unanimous consent for the following motion:

That, on Tuesday, March 27, 2001, no proceedings pursuant to Standing Order 38 shall take place, but, at 6.30 p.m. on that day, the House shall proceed to consider a motion "That the House take note of the Summit of the Americas", which shall be disposed of as follows:

1. No Member shall speak for more than twenty minutes, with a ten minute period for question and comments, provided that two Members may split a twenty minute period between them;
2. During the debate thereon, the Chair shall not receive any quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent to propose any other motion;
3. When no Member rises to speak, the House shall adjourn to the next sitting day.

The Speaker: Does the hon. government House leader have unanimous consent of the House to propose the motion?

Business of the House

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

REPORT STAGE MOTIONS

The Speaker: Before I call orders of the day, I would like to make a statement on a matter that may be of interest during the course of the debate that is to take place later this afternoon.

As all hon. members are aware, recently the House has given guidance to the Speaker on the selection of report stage motions. This occurred on February 27, 2001, when the House adopted the following note to Standing Orders 76 and 76.1:

For greater clarity, the Speaker will not select for debate a motion or series of motions of a repetitive, frivolous or vexatious nature or of a nature that would serve merely to prolong unnecessarily proceedings at the report stage and, in exercising this power of selection, the Speaker shall be guided by the practice followed in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom.

[Translation]

On March 15, in a ruling on a point of order raised by the hon. member for Richmond—Arthabaska, I undertook to return to the House with a statement on how this note will be interpreted. Today, I would like to take a moment to provide the House with this interpretation.

Before I begin, I want to mention that from time to time when the House adopts new procedures, Speakers have seen fit to address the manner in which they will be implemented. Often this occurs when a certain amount of latitude or discretion is given to the Chair. In enforcing new procedures, the Speaker acts as a servant of the House, not as its master.

• (1540)

Therefore, in order that these new procedures function properly, I see it as my duty to make a statement on their operation now, before the House is seized with a bill at report stage.

[English]

In 1968, rules concerning the selection of report stage amendments were established. At that time, the House first undertook a thorough revision of its legislative process which resulted in our modern rules where bills are sent to committee for detailed examination, followed by an opportunity for consideration in the House in what is known as report stage. As *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* explains on page 663:

In recommending that report stage be revived, the 1968 Special Committee on Procedure considered that stage to be essential in order to provide all Members of the

Business of the House

House, and not merely members of the committee, with an opportunity to express their views on the bills under consideration and to propose amendments, where appropriate. However, the intent of the Committee was not for this stage to become a repetition of committee stage. Unlike committee stage where the bill is considered clause by clause, there was not to be any debate at report stage unless notices of amendment were given, and then debate would have to be strictly relevant to those proposed amendments.

In order to prevent report stage from becoming merely a repetition of committee stage, the Speaker was given the authority to select and group motions of amendment for debate. Over the past 30 years, a large body of practice has grown on how this important legislative stage is conducted.

Let me briefly review how it works today. When notice of a motion of amendment is given by a member, the Speaker has a number of issues to address. First of all, the Speaker must judge the procedural admissibility of the motion; if the motion does not meet the time-tested rules of practice, it will not be deemed admissible and therefore will not be accepted for publication on the notice paper.

Once a motion passes the basic test of admissibility, the Speaker must then determine whether the motion can be selected for debate. For guidance, the House has given the Speaker certain criteria to apply, for example, motions already defeated in committee are not normally selected. Once the Speaker has selected the motions that will be debated, a decision is made on grouping them for debate with other motions that have a similar theme or purpose. Finally, the Speaker determines how the motions should be voted on, for example, whether one vote applies to several motions, or whether the adoption of one motion obviates the need to vote on another motion. When all of these questions—admissibility, selection, grouping, voting pattern—have been addressed, the Speaker provides the House with the report stage ruling.

The first two tests which the Speaker applies to motions, those of admissibility and selection, are the most important in our discussion today. I would refer the House to Marleau and Montpetit, pages 649 to 669, for a detailed discussion of our rules and practice in this regard.

With regard to admissibility, the Speaker must strictly apply a number of rules of procedure. Does the motion go beyond the scope of the bill? Is it relevant to the bill? Or is the motion incomplete? Either the motion is inadmissible and is returned to the member, or it is admissible and proceeds to the next test, that is, the test of selection.

[*Translation*]

With regard to selection, the Speaker in 1968 was given a greater amount of flexibility and discretion. In the last 30 years, as practice evolved, successive Speakers were encouraged to exercise more rigour in the selection of motions in amendment.

[*English*]

In 1985, the third report of the all party Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, the McGrath committee,

recommended that the Speaker use existing powers to select as well as combine amendments at the report stage. The committee suggested certain principles to guide the Speaker on how this could be done. To quote from the report:

An amendment disposed of in committee should not be revived unless it is of exceptional significance. Amendments ruled out of order in committee should not be reconsidered unless there are reasonable grounds for doing so. Amendments proposed to implement government undertakings should be selected automatically. In selecting other amendments, the Speaker should seek guidance through consultation. The Speaker should determine, in consultation with the House leaders, which amendments are regarded as the most important from the party point of view.

• (1545)

The report proceeded to list several other guidelines. It is evident that this was a very tall order for any Speaker. The committee recognized the significance of such discretionary powers in the hands of the Speaker and commented that, in their view, successive Speakers had hesitated to use to its fullest the power to select without further direction from the House.

[*Translation*]

The House sought to provide such direction in 1986 when amendments to the standing orders included for the first time the note to the present Standing Order 76. This note took up some, but not all, of the criteria contained in the McGrath Committee report.

From that point on, our practices have evolved to where they are today and in reviewing those practices, I was struck by the reluctance of my predecessors to use the powers of selection in any but the most generous manner, giving members the benefit of the doubt in most instances.

In the last parliament, the House was faced with several bills (i.e., Nisga'a, clarity, young offenders) where, at report stage, hundreds of motions in amendment were placed on the notice paper.

The most recent attempt to address the situation occurred last February 27, 2001 when, by adopting Government Motion No. 2, the House again sought to provide the Speaker with more guidance on the manner of selection of report stage amendments.

Here again, as so often in the troubled history of report stage, we see the hope that a more interventionist approach by the Chair will resolve difficulties that are being experienced.

It is not for me as your Speaker to interpret the confluence of events that led up to the unprecedented gridlock the House faced at report stage in the last parliament.

However, even if one grants that the Chair has, in the past, been too reticent in the exercise of its power of selection, I would argue that this abundance of caution, if such we may call it, is only one of the circumstances that have contributed to the potential crisis that we face at the report stage.

Government Orders

As your Speaker, I am ready to shoulder the report stage responsibilities that the House has spelled out for me. However, I think it would be naive to hope that the frustrations implicit in the putting on notice of hundreds of motions in amendment of a bill will somehow be answered by bringing greater rigour to the Speaker's process of selection.

[*English*]

On that cautionary note, I want now to outline my approach with regard to the selection of report stage amendments for debate in view of this most recent directive from the House.

First, past selection practices not affected by this latest directive will continue to apply. For example, motions and amendments that were presented in committee will not be selected, nor will motions ruled out of order in committee. Motions defeated in committee will only be selected if the Speaker judges them to be of exceptional significance. I refer hon. members to pages 667 to 669 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* for a fuller discussion of these practices.

[*Translation*]

Second, regarding the new guidelines, I will apply the tests of repetition, frivolity, vexatiousness and unnecessary prolongation of report stage proceedings insofar as it is possible to do so in the particular circumstances with which the Chair is faced.

It is in regard to these four criteria alone that I will have reference to the practice followed in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, and not to the wider practice surrounding what is called "consideration stage" of bills at Westminster, which practice is not relevant to our own traditions and not helpful to their clarification.

• (1550)

[*English*]

I intend to apply these four criteria to all amendments at report stage no matter which side of the House they come from. I also intend to apply those criteria in the original note, whose validity has been endorsed by the adoption of government Motion No. 2. Specifically, motions in amendment that could have been presented in committee will not be selected.

Accordingly, I would strongly urge all members and all parties to avail themselves fully of the opportunity to propose amendments during committee stage so that the report stage can return to the purpose for which it was created, namely for the House to consider the committee report and the work the committee has done, and to do such further work as it deems necessary to complete detailed consideration of the bill.

That being said, I believe that this approach will result in the Speaker's selection of amendments at report stage being a far more rigorous exercise than it has been to date, no matter how challenging such an exercise may be.

[*Translation*]

Finally, the Chair intends to maintain its current practice of not providing justification for the selection of amendments, or reasons for the non-selection of amendments at the time of a report stage ruling.

However, in exceptional circumstances, the Chair may expand this usual approach and explain its reasons where this shall be deemed necessary or appropriate.

May I end my remarks by reminding members that at the conclusion of today's debate, the House will have adopted a motion creating a special committee to make recommendations on the modernization and improvement of its procedures.

Without anticipating what the committee may decide to recommend, it is entirely possible that the House may at some future date be seized with proposals that may have an impact on my statement today.

Naturally, as your servant, I will continue to be guided by whatever rules the House may, in its wisdom, decide upon to conduct its business.

[*English*]

I want to thank all hon. members for their attention to this ruling which I hope has clarified the situation somewhat for hon. members. For those who found it more confusing, we will have it wait and see what happens on the first report stage.

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Am I permitted to ask you a question of clarification respecting your statement?

The Speaker: I think what the hon. member should do is read the statement later. I am sure after reading it he will not have any questions. It would be better if he approached the Chair without asking questions in the House. There is not really a question period for Speakers. I thank the hon. member for his interest.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

MODERNIZATION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS PROCEDURE

Hon. Don Boudria (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.) moved:

That a special committee of the House be appointed to consider and make recommendations on the modernization and improvement of the procedures of the House of Commons;

Government Orders

That the Members of the committee shall be the Deputy Speaker and the House Leaders of each of the officially recognized parties, provided that substitutions may be made from time to time, if required, in the manner provided for in Standing Order 114(2);

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order, the Chair of the committee shall be the Deputy Speaker and the Vice-Chairs shall be the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and the House Leader of the Official Opposition;

That the committee shall have all of the powers granted to Standing Committees in Standing Order 108;

That the committee shall not adopt any report without the unanimous agreement of all the Members of the committee;

That the committee may recommend to the House texts of new or amended Standing Orders;

That the committee may make recommendations for changes to relevant statutes and, if it does so, such recommendations shall be deemed to have been made pursuant to an Order adopted pursuant to Standing Order 68(4); and

That the committee shall present its final report no later than Friday, June 1, 2001.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today about government Motion No. 3. I will not read the motion now but I will concentrate my time on talking about what I see as modernization of House rules.

• (1555)

I would like to begin my comments by outlining the parliamentary initiatives that have already taken place since November 2000, since the last election.

I will begin with measures that have recently been approved by the Board of Internal Economy. Funds for political parties represented in the House have been reallocated to take into account the new standings in the House following the last election. This provided an additional \$900,000 in funds which would have otherwise lapsed for items such as party research, caucus services, whips' offices and so on.

Members office budgets have been increased by \$20,000 per member of parliament to cover items such as additional staff salary expenses, office rents and so on.

The members of parliament housing allowance has been improved by \$3,000 to cover higher accommodation costs that MPs face in the Ottawa housing market, which is of course very tight. Hon. members were having some difficulty making ends meet with the previous budget.

The motion before us today builds on these improvements and follows up on the commitment made in the Speech from the Throne to strengthen the institution of parliament.

I will mention two initiatives that have already been addressed, namely the resolution of the report stage issue just clarified before the House of Commons by Mr. Speaker, and the announcement I made together with the leader of the government in the other place some days ago about increasing the research capacity for the Library of Parliament by an amount of \$986,000 per year. All of these are improvements to strengthen this institution.

Today's motion proposes to implement a commitment in the Speech from the Throne to improve the rules of the House of Commons. The terms of the modernization committee are set in the motion that was read by Your Honour moments ago.

The Chair and hon. members will have noticed that this committee will only report on items where we have unanimous agreement. In other words, where we agree there will be a change. Where we do not, it will be the end of the discussion. That is an excellent formula. It was not one that I thought of myself. I give credit to other hon. members with whom I have consulted. Members across the way proposed this formula for reporting. For that, I congratulate them.

I also want to thank all hon. members for accepting to put this motion before the House in the terms that we have today.

Finally, the committee will report no later than June 1 in order to enable the House to deal with the matter expeditiously.

I am one who believes we can only make large changes, if we achieve them they will be large changes, in the initial part of a parliament. After that it is simply too difficult to do so. As we get near an election it is effectively impossible to change the rules of parliament. I have been in enough parliaments to know that the older a parliament gets the more difficult it is to modernize the institution. Therefore, these changes must be undertaken at the beginning of parliament.

I and other members of the proposed modernization committee will be interested in what members of the House have to say on the proposed changes. From my part, I would be willing to support a further debate in the House on an evening. As a matter of fact, all House leaders have already been consulted on this and have informally agreed to do just that.

As members will know from experience, the House of Commons has had five political parties since 1997. Some members may recall that the so-called pundits of parliament in 1997 alleged that the House would not be able to function at all. They called it the pizza parliament, the House divided, divided into several parties. They said it would be chaotic and unproductive. They have been wrong, thanks in large measure, to the co-operation that I have received from House leaders on all sides of the House, through the excellent chairmanship of this institution, through the excellent staff supporting us and, it is never said around here, largely through the good and constructive behaviour of members of parliament on all sides of the House.

• (1600)

The House has worked well in the last two elections. I submit that we have made dozens and dozens of changes to the standing orders, proof that the House simply could not function under five parties.

There were not provisions for five parties when I became the government leader in the House in 1997. We all had to sit down, which we did, and we made the changes necessary to reflect existing conditions in the House.

At the risk of quoting myself in my first meeting with my opposition counterparts in 1997, I told them that we had been elected to make parliament work and that nobody had been elected

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to make parliament not work. I am glad to say that I truly believe that is the attitude they all took.

That is one of the reasons a modernization committee, which includes House leaders of all parties as well as the Deputy Speaker, has good prospects for agreeing to further improvements to House rules. Of course, ultimately everyone has a veto if anything is proposed that they do not like. A modernization committee of House rules will be successful because all House leaders have worked closely with their caucuses and they all have excellent records of achievement.

I have already met with interested members of the government caucus, and I intend to do so again throughout the modernization committee's mandate between now and June.

To review this, I would like to have another debate like this a few weeks hence in the House as members gather their thoughts on the subject. I would also like to have another meeting with my own caucus colleagues, plus of course all the informal meetings we have with one another around here.

Another reason I am confident about the committee is that it draws on the very successful work of a very similar committee, practically identical as a matter of fact, in the United Kingdom.

The official opposition leader and I were privileged to appear before what they call the U.K. modernization committee earlier this year. We both testified before that committee. We were impressed by the U.K. committee's organization and by the quality of its work. I hope we are equally successful in this House.

Let me identify and offer for comment some changes I would like to see. Perhaps some members will argue that many of the things I am about to suggest would be more beneficial for the government, although not everything I say will do that. Everyone should enter the debate with an open mind and enumerate things that they think will work better for them and hopefully for the other side of the House. As we sit together, after listening to several hours of contributions from members, we should be able to improve the rules.

Let me give the House a few ideas to start. First, we have at present a committee room with television facilities. I understand that we have the equipment and facilities ready for a second one. Why not have another room on Parliament Hill fully available with television facilities for the benefit of members of parliamentary committees who want to avail themselves of it? With two such committee rooms and proper scheduling, I am quite confident that virtually any committee that wants to have its proceedings televised will be able to do so.

Second, why can we not have greater use of committee teleconferencing? Every time we have committee teleconferencing now, the committee must come and ask the House to do it. I do not believe that is necessary. In 2001, with the excellent committee

chairs and vice-chairs that we have, committees should be able to decide whether they want to teleconference with witnesses throughout Canada.

● (1605)

Canada is the second largest country in the world and the most technologically advanced country in the world, if I can brag a bit. There is no reason we cannot make it easier for Canadians to have video teleconferencing and to testify before parliamentary committees. It would enable committees to work better.

Let me touch a bit on the estimate process. In 1993 the government announced it wanted to work with members of parliament to improve the estimate process. In addition to the estimates we now have a provision whereby we identify the propose future years expenditures. Together with my colleague the President of the Treasury Board, I would improve on future years expenditures to ensure more information is made available to members of parliament. Hopefully, then, greater use would be made of it by hon. members.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to turn to interparliamentary relations, which are very important. We have close relationships, of course, with the parliamentary associations of a number of countries, and I encourage all hon. members be involved with these associations.

I for one believe we should never have to apologize for our relationships with other countries. If this means being criticized occasionally by the media for flying off to some other country, that is too bad. It goes with the territory. We live in a country that depends on international trade, that depends on international relations, a country that believes in multilateralism, so let us then participate in interparliamentary relations with other countries.

It is high time as well for us to think of entering into interparliamentary relations with the provinces, something not much developed in the past. Why are there no interparliamentary relations between Ottawa and Quebec City, between Ottawa and Toronto, between Ottawa and the other provinces? One of my party's backbenchers made that suggestion to me a few days ago, and I thank him for it.

[*English*]

I will talk about changing some of the rules of the House.

[*Translation*]

The Leader of the Official Opposition in the House proposed that candidates for the position of House of Commons' Speaker at the

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start of a session have a chance to speak before the House prior to a vote. Why not? I would be prepared to develop a similar idea, which was suggested by the leaders of the opposition in the House.

Another suggestion, this time is one of my own. We have Standing Order 57, called closure or time allocation motion. To date we have had to vote at 11 p.m. under this standing order. It is outdated and a holdover from when parliament sat until 11 p.m. every evening. It is not modern. It does not reflect the fact that the committees sit early in the morning. It should be modernized, as we did at report stage not long ago.

Why not say 8 p.m., 8.30 p.m., 10 p.m., but definitely not 11 p.m., the present time. It is much too late and does not serve any purpose. The members are not productive at that hour and it does not improve the quality of the debate to sit until 11 p.m., when members have been here since 7 a.m.

[English]

I will talk briefly about concurrence motions for committee reports. We could consider restricting committee report concurrence motions. Right now they are moved in a rather haphazard way and do not seem to do very much. Why not have a measure to restrict concurrence motions until after the government has responded to a committee report? How can we concur in a report if we have asked the government to respond to it? If we concur in it there is no need for the response. There is a contradiction in the rule which needs to be clarified.

Sometimes an hon. member will ask for concurrence in a committee report when the committee itself never asked that the report be concurred in. That is another contradiction that needs to be modernized.

With regard to committees, just so that members do not think I want all this to be to the advantage of the government, we have right now a provision where the government has 150 days to respond to a committee report. That is too long. Some 150 days later no one here even remembers what the original committee report was about. I therefore propose to shorten that.

• (1610)

I should like to offer the following thought. Why not make it 120 days or 75 sitting days, whichever is less, because it could sometimes cover the summer period in which we do not sit for many months? By having the shorter of the two provisions we would reduce the time for responding by as much as one-third.

Why not make routine procedural committee concurrences votable but not debatable? I am referring to such issues as committee travel. If a committee wants to travel to hear witnesses in British Columbia, Newfoundland or anywhere else, right now we virtually need unanimous consent of the House. That is not reasonable and it is not modern. Why can we not have a measure where we could vote on it?

If we need a higher threshold than a simple majority we could use a reverse vote, such as the measure we have for extending hours where 20 or 25 or whatever number of members can rise and prevent it if they want.

Right now effectively any one member has the ability to stop a committee from doing its work if it must go outside Ottawa to hear witnesses. We can modernize that. I have offered two or three different formulas.

I will talk about opposition day motions. I notice the Leader of the Opposition is with us. I invite him, and others of course, to think about the following because it affects the official opposition more than anyone else. It affects all opposition parties, albeit to a lesser degree.

Why not examine whether the mover should be able to split the time on an opposition motion and produce an amendment that makes the motion unamendable? That was started by way of a loophole in 1994. It did not exist before that. I do not believe it advances debate. We used to be able to amend a motion over here and make it acceptable to a greater number of members and thereby pass it. It is very difficult to do that now.

Another thing is the notice provision. Right now it is 6 p.m. Hon. members want us all to have an intelligent debate on important issues facing the nation, yet we are informed at 5.45 p.m. that we must discuss the future of agriculture in Canada or the future of criminal justice or the future of anything else. We then have about 12 hours to get the entire bureaucracy and the government ministers and everyone else organized to respond to issues so important to the nation.

If we are serious about dealing with issues that way, hopefully we could back up that time and make it, say, 10 o'clock in the morning. Whenever the House meets in the morning it could be tabled at exactly that time so that all members would know at once and could prepare to respond on the following day. These are just ideas, but they could advance debate.

I will introduce a few more. We could update the procedures for reinstating government bills in a new session. We do not have that now. We did adopt it for private members' bills. It was an initiative by the former House leader of the then Reform Party. However we did not do it for government bills at the time. I think it should be the same for both cases.

We also need to address the issue of programming the work at committee to ensure that committees are able to function better. The referral of estimates from the House to committee is a votable motion right now. It does not do anything. If we did not vote for it, it presumably would mean that we would deal with the estimates on the floor of the House, as if we could do that. It is left over from a bygone era.

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Why not look at the time for the leadoff speeches? Is it the modern way of doing it?

Right now we have a curious situation in the parliamentary calendar. We have one week off in March, which means most members do not have March break at the same time as their families. If we came back one week earlier and took two weeks off in March, most provinces would probably coincide with it three years out of four, or something like that. What would be wrong with that? We would not lose any House time; it would make things work better.

With respect to deferring the votes, we defer them now until usually the end of government orders.

• (1615)

Why do we not have votes at exactly 3 o'clock on Tuesdays when most members are already here? We could add whatever time is lost, perhaps 10 or 15 minutes, to the end of the day. As all members would already be here, the whips could just walk in. At the end of the day, members could do everything else that they have to do when the House adjourns. If members had committees or other business to attend to, they would then not need to return to the House at the end of the day to vote.

Why not formalize the procedure whereby whips supply votes for their colleagues in the House? Again, it requires unanimous consent within a party, but we could formalize that procedure.

Hon. colleagues on the other side of the House have looked at having a mini question period immediately before the government House leader, or any other minister for that matter but generally speaking it is I who does it, invokes time allocation. This could be a 10 minute period where members could ask the government to explain its decision to invoke time allocation. In the mix of all that, I do not object to doing that. It is accountability.

It has been suggested by the opposition House leader that the appointment of the Clerk of the House could be subject to a vote in the House. I would not object to that. Right now it is a government appointment made under my recommendation.

With regard to question period, the British house has thematic question periods three days a week: Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. It would be a radical change around here, but we could at least try a thematic question period one day a week, perhaps on Fridays. Members from both sides of the House could reduce their numbers, if they wanted to. We could have differing themes each Friday, such as industry, treasury board, finance and so on. The themes would always be designated by the opposition in a way similar to the designation of opposition days and with the same apportionment for political parties. Each party would be allowed to choose a theme. It is an idea that I am willing to discuss with colleagues.

A second chamber has been proposed for discussing other issues. Australia and the United Kingdom have done that. Australia's is called the main committee and the United Kingdom's is called Westminster hall. They both deal with local and private members' issues. They have adjournment debates that are similar to the ones we have at the end of the day, except that they do not necessarily require a question to have been raised previously. They only require a notice to be put on the order paper. Their members can discuss issues important to their constituents but perhaps not always important enough to make it to the national agenda. It is important for us as local members to be able to do that.

[*Translation*]

As for private members' business, the committee could examine the conclusions of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs on the subject. At present, members of parliament wonder which items should be votable and non-votable.

Some feel that every item from private members' business should be a votable item, while others disagree. If we make them votable, that will mean that fewer members will see their particular items come before the House, of course, because votable items require longer debates than non-votable ones.

I would like the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to provide advice to us. We could then refer the issue to the modernization committee for further review.

[*English*]

I have given a few ideas to kick-start the debate in the House. No, I have not talked about the constitutional convention of supply. No, I have not reformed the Senate today. No, I have not rewritten the constitution in the last 20 minutes. I am not proposing to and I never said that I would. What constitutes confidence will not be discussed here by me. Others can, if they so choose, but that is a constitutional issue and has nothing to do with the rules of the House. That is outside the parameters of what is here.

I have kept my remarks to what I think will be constructive in starting the debate on improving how this institution works. I hope all hon. members will do the same during the rest of this day. In the next few minutes I will probably have to leave the Chamber for a few minutes, but I intend to be here for several hours later this day to listen to the contributions from all honourable members on this subject.

• (1620)

I am looking forward to the work of the committee. I am looking forward to a second debate a few weeks hence in the House. I am looking forward to meeting with my own caucus colleagues. If

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caucus colleagues of other parties would want me to listen to their ideas, I would make myself available to do that too.

I hope to be able to contribute something between now and June 1, along with everyone else, to make this place work better. That being said, the House is not hopelessly defective. It is a grand institution. It works well but it can work better. I ask all colleagues to work together with me so that we can contribute to making this great institution even better than it already is.

The Deputy Speaker: I see the hon. member for Winnipeg—Transcona rising. A question and comment period is not provided for in the rules of debate at this time. However, should the member, through the Chair, seek unanimous consent, I would put the request to the House.

Mr. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The motion we adopted earlier has everyone speaking for 20 minutes with 10 minutes for questions and comments.

The Deputy Speaker: I certainly do not want to engage in debate. I am only working with what I have before me, the Projected Order of Business for Wednesday, March 21. Under government orders, Government Business No. 3 reads:

Length of speeches, pursuant to Standing Order 43—

The Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister moving the motion and the Member replying immediately after the Minister—unlimited time.

The following three Members—20 minutes maximum and speeches are subject to a 10 minute question and comment period.

All other Members—10 minutes maximum and speeches are subject to a 5 minute question and comment period.

Is there unanimous consent for the member to ask a question?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

* * *

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup—Témiscouata—Les Basques will not be present in the House to introduce his bill under private members' business according to the notice given in today's notice paper.

[*English*]

Accordingly the bill will be dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper and the House will continue with the business before it prior to private members' hour.

**MODERNIZATION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS
PROCEDURE**

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Stockwell Day (Leader of the Opposition, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, if you seek unanimous consent, I believe you would find agreement for me to split my time with the member for Fraser Valley.

The Deputy Speaker: I will need help from the Leader of the Opposition in this regard because, as he knows, the rules provide for him to have unlimited time.

The Chair has some difficulty on how to apportion or divide the unlimited time. The hon. member might help the Chair by indicating if we are talking about splitting a block of time, for instance 20 minutes or 30 minutes. We should have some type of indication.

Mr. Stockwell Day: Mr. Speaker, I can give assurance that my remarks will be no more than 15 minutes at the most. The remarks of the member for Fraser Valley would be approximately 10 minutes. We will definitely work toward that.

The Deputy Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the proposal of the Leader of the Opposition. Is there agreement?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Stockwell Day: Mr. Speaker, I thank hon. members for their agreement. I stand in the House today in support of the motion to create this special committee to recommend ways to modernize and improve procedures in the House. It is a step in the right direction. The Canadian Alliance and I hope it will signal the beginning of a very worthwhile journey.

Being somewhat skeptical, I have to say that we do not want to prejudice where the journey will finally take us but we do hope it leads to an enhanced sense of democracy, not just in the House but also in the country. In the last election only 61% of registered voters even bothered going to the polls. It was the lowest turnout in recent Canadian history.

● (1625)

Of those who did vote we know that 41% supported the Liberals, giving them a majority in the House of Commons. When we take a closer look and include all the registered voters who did not bother to cast their ballots, we see that the present government has the support of about 25% of Canadians. That is a sobering thought and a sobering reality.

What do these numbers tell us? One of the things the polls show us is that Canadians are becoming increasingly cynical about

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politics and about whether their votes mean anything. As a matter of fact they are feeling increasingly alienated from the whole process of government itself. That is a disturbing situation and the results of the committee could actually have something to do with remedying that. That is why we look forward with hope, although I say that with some scepticism, to the final results.

It is up to every elected member in the House to win back the trust of the Canadian people. People will be watching the committee. It will be reported on quite properly, and it is up to us to prove to citizens everywhere that democracy is alive and well and living in Ottawa in these halls and in this Chamber. That will be the challenge for the committee.

We are seeing some signs that change is in the air. These signs are fragile. They are like the first green shoots of the crocuses and the daffodils. We hope that these changes will prove to be as inevitable as the first signs of spring. We hope that happens.

We applaud the Speaker's ruling on a question of privilege concerning the justice minister, where the Speaker deemed that the justice minister had in fact acted inappropriately in releasing certain documents to the media before members of parliament had the opportunity to view those important papers.

We applaud the independence of the Chair in making that ruling. It gives us hope. It speaks to a regard for the highest principles and not partisanship. The power to effect real democratic change rests with every member of the House, but the ability to exercise that power will at times take courage and a willingness to stand on principle.

Canadians are really not seeing members of parliament exercising the power we have been granted constitutionally. They see power concentrated in the hands of a few, mostly unelected advisers in the Prime Minister's Office. That is what most Canadians see. They see the MPs who are elected to represent them voting the government line.

We see government MPs being referred to by the Prime Minister in the most cynical of terms as terra cotta warriors that stand in line and vote the way they are told. That is a denigrating way, in my view, of treating one's own colleagues and one's members of parliament. It must sting when Liberal MPs read that about themselves and they see what their Prime Minister is calling them.

I have said before and I will say it again that the Prime Minister and the Liberal government treat parliament as a rubber stamp for the plans which are drawn up in back rooms. It is clearly too often the case and that is not right. The House of Commons should be a place where real debate takes place and real action takes place on that debate. Debate that originates in the living rooms, kitchens, coffee shops and workshops of the country should be brought to the House.

As a recent example, we know that many members of parliament on the government side share our concern about the plight of farmers in Canada. Yesterday those members buckled to pressure from the Prime Minister's Office and they actually voted down a motion which would have given aid to farmers. Yet we know many of those members, had they been able to stand for their constituents, would have supported that aid.

Hon. Charles Caccia: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. If I heard the Leader of the Opposition correctly, he was commenting on a vote that took place in the House yesterday in a derogatory manner with respect to those who voted against the motion proposed by the official opposition.

I would respectfully submit that the hon. Leader of the Opposition is out of order when making such comments on a vote that has taken place in the House.

• (1630)

The Deputy Speaker: I feel confident that in fact the intervention and the interpretation by our colleague from Davenport is correct. I just ask the Leader of the Opposition to be guided in fact by those remarks which, in my humble estimation, are correct. The House should not reflect on a vote previously taken by it.

Mr. Stockwell Day: Mr. Speaker, that is an interesting ruling which I respect, although I am not familiar with it. I will just make observations and not reflect pejoratively in any sense.

The nation observed a motion by opposition members to endorse something that was proposed at one point. That something was a promise by the Prime Minister and the government that we would have an ethics commissioner. It was a promise taken from the red book. We took the words verbatim because we agreed with the proposal. I have said as opposition leader that where possible we will agree with and support the government on things that are good for our nation. We took that promise verbatim and made it a motion because we agreed. We wanted MPs to be able to vote freely. I will just make the observation that the Liberal MPs voted down their own promise.

That is the type of freedom that we are looking for in the House of Commons to restore the confidence of Canadians.

[*Translation*]

The concentration of powers in the PMO is not irremediable. It is not part of the Canadian constitution. It has developed as a convention, a disciplinary habit that has diminished the role of all duly elected MPs.

This concentration undermines democracy and the respect the Canadian population has always had for its elected representatives.

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Each member of this House has the responsibility to stand up and be heard, to show that the principles of democracy are dear to him or her. MPs have a duty to show that democratic principles are more important than the carrot and the stick, than reward and punishment.

[English]

These things are more important. Standing for democracy is more important.

When the parliament opened, our first task was the duty of electing a Speaker. It makes a big difference to the House of Commons and to the Canadian people when the Speaker is perceived as someone who is fair to all parties. We believe that is the case here. The election of a Speaker by members of the House is something that most Canadians have taken for granted, even though it is actually a fairly recent convention.

There is a story from our past concerning the election of Speaker that I believe serves as an example to the members of the House of Commons. It is a story that shows that members are not, and do not have to be, helpless pawns in a parliament ruled by the Prime Minister's office. It was back in 1827. I know, Mr. Speaker, that you would be familiar with this not because you were ever near that particular era, but because you are a student of these things. It was the Assembly of Lower Canada that elected Louis-Joseph Papineau to be its Speaker.

[Translation]

When Papineau asked the governor for official approval, the governor refused to confirm his appointment. The members of the Assembly of Lower Canada did not submit humbly to this. They refused to elect anyone else and they stuck to their guns. It was difficult, and it took courage.

The government had to interrupt its activities. Nothing happened for a year, but eventually democracy prevailed. A new governor confirmed Louis-Joseph Papineau as Speaker.

[English]

The Prime Minister and others might argue that the machinery of government control is more important than the members of parliament themselves. However we have to remember that these constituents whom we represent are more important than the so-called machinery that comes out of the office of the Prime Minister. The people of Canada are more important than the machinery. Government should be for people, not people for government. Sometimes and too often in this assembly, it is the other way around.

We hope the creation of a special committee to make recommendations on modernizing and improving these procedures will be a first step. However, the real change we are calling for demands far more than what a committee can deliver and more than what a committee can recommend. What we are asking for, I believe, is going to demand character and virtues like courage.

• (1635)

We could wait for three or four years until the Canadian people decide to change the government, but we know that in that period of time many more Canadians will be asking themselves why they should bother to vote when their MPs cannot even speak for them once they arrive in Ottawa.

[Translation]

We can wait for the next election or we can act as MPs ought to act, and start exercising the power that is ours, in order to get some changes made.

If we show that we really want to do our job here in Ottawa, the Canadian public will understand.

[English]

We need more free votes in the House of Commons. We have to abandon the convention, and this is not a constitutional issue, that any losing vote for the government is a vote of non-confidence. We need to address that.

Let us give real power to committees and allow members of committees to elect their own chairs instead of having the Prime Minister make the appointment. Let us have the chairs and the vice chairs elected by secret ballot, just as the Speaker is now elected. It is good for the Speaker, it should be good for the chairs.

Let us allow private members to bring bills that actually come to a vote without having to pass through a party dominated committee process.

I know many of my colleagues from across the aisle share my concerns. They would like democratic reform to proceed just as we do. The MP from Toronto—Danforth, as a good upstanding Liberal MP, said “Parliament does not work. It is broken. It is like a car motor working on two cylinders”. Another Liberal MP and former Quebec cabinet minister said “Being in the backbench we are typecast as if we are all stupid. We are just supposed to be voting machines”.

We need to change that. If these MPs have the bravery and the courage to talk about change like that then we need to embrace that change.

Government members and opposition members alike know that the people of Canada want us to do better. They want us to deliver true change and real democracy. We have a list of things that have to be done.

When the hon. member talked about the changes he wanted to see, I was waiting expectantly. I was thinking he was going to make some recommendations for change would break the ground for democracy and usher in fresh breezes of freedom to the House of

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Commons. I thought that when Canadians heard the Liberal House leader speak they would say “That’s fantastic”. He unleashed to the Chamber just moments ago the waves of freedom which would cause us to surge onto the beaches of democracy. Let us listen to those.

He wants to move closure from 11 p.m. to 8 p.m. Now there is a democracy breaking move. How about this? He said “Let us deal with restricting a committee report concurrence motion”. I wonder if he said that when he was out on the hustings. Did he stand before constituents who were talking about freedom and say “We will bring something in to restrict a committee report concurrence motion?”

I am not trying to diminish these tiny moves but they should just be mere shadows of changes that are far more monumental, the shadows of changes that will bring true democracy into the House and restore for Canadians the sense that they own this place.

I close with the words a wise person said to me the first time I was elected. I was quite jubilant that particular night. As I was leaving the party which was going on, he said “I want to know if you know the definition of the word instant”. I asked him what the definition was. He said “Usually it is the time it takes an elected member to go from representing his or her constituents to representing the government”.

We need to remember that. We need to think of our constituents and think of freedom and democracy in this place.

I agreed to share my time, and I thank members for agreeing, with the member for Fraser Valley who has also been a leader in the area of true democratic reform which will vitalise the process in Canada and send a message to all Canadians, including young people, that the government truly is here to work for them.

Mr. Chuck Strahl (Fraser Valley, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I want to zero in specifically on why there needs to be a special committee, which the motion we are debating today would set up.

• (1640)

The regular standing order review which is required under Standing Order 51 is taking place this evening. We will be debating which standing orders should be changed.

If we look at the mandate of the committee that will be reviewing this, there are seven paragraphs in the standing orders outlining the responsibilities of the committee. Parliamentary reform is only one of those responsibilities. If parliamentary reform is the priority which I think all members of the House would like to make it, then the time is right for a special committee dedicated to developing proposals to modernize this place.

In the last parliament the process to reform the rules began with a similar debate to this one, on April 21, 1998. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs was supposed to take the wisdom of the debate and come up with proposals to reform the

House. The committee did not get around to considering parliamentary reform until October 2000. Then the election came and time ran out. In other words, it just did not happen. Not a single standing order change proposal came to committee, made it through the House and became a change that we could enjoy in this 37th parliament.

The last major reform done in the House of Commons was done by a special committee chaired by James McGrath. The member for Winnipeg—Transcona frequently refers to the work of that committee. I am convinced a special committee is required because a special job like modernizing parliament requires a single focused committee to get the job done.

As a member of the proposed committee, I look forward to working with a smaller committee. The McGrath committee emphasized and recommended a smaller committee. The McGrath committee report stated that the committee should focus more on the task at hand, be less partisan and work toward consensus much easier.

I am convinced that a smaller group is more productive than a larger group, as long as the committee reflects the proportionate party representation when it comes to speaking time, questions and comments, witnesses and so on. One of the recommendations I hope we will eventually see is the creation of smaller committees that look after the speaking time and weighted votes. I believe this can be achieved in the days to come.

The other interesting aspect of this committee is the fact that its report must be unanimous. If we are to reform parliament in a meaningful way, and not just in a way that strengthens the executive, both the opposition and government must buy into the proposals. Ramming through changes under closure, as the government did not so long ago, will not work in the long run. This is inviting the opposition to find ways to get cranky with the government. It also invites the opposition to find loopholes in the standing orders to express its frustration. Surely that is not what we should be spending our time doing.

We should be spending our time in this committee and in this debate today trying to find ways to come to unanimity on important changes that give power to all parliamentarians, not just the executive branch.

I remember when the government’s famous Motion No. 8 was on the order paper in the last parliament. That was a knee-jerk reaction by the government. The motion was not intended to address opposition grievances. It was simply intended to punish the opposition. The government House leader, who normally enjoyed a co-operative opposition for the most part, faced a revolt on this motion that even his skills and his majority could not have handled. I believe the Speaker would likely have ruled Motion No. 8 out of order if it had been debated.

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That draconian measure eventually was dropped because of the realization that we could not have meaningful reform in this place if it was going to be done unilaterally. The House would have been consumed with routine orders of procedure unless the government had the co-operation of opposition parties. No one, especially the government House leader, would have liked to see that happen.

I also believe that the timing of this committee is right because the spirit is right for change. My party has a number of proposals already on the table. Our last batch of proposals were released in a document entitled "Building Trust". It has taken me personally by considerable surprise because literally thousands of people have requested copies of it. I cannot believe there is that much interest in parliamentary reform.

• (1645)

It is an indication that not only is the time right for members of the House to begin fixing parliament, but Canadians are calling for it and the media are willing to communicate it, for maybe the first time. Members of parliament can actually get cachet on this subject and can get traction on this subject back home, where people are saying that parliamentary reform is long overdue.

The latest series of proposals, which I will be releasing tomorrow morning, builds on the original building trust document. I will be contacting all members of parliament to get them to talk about what I guess we can call "building trust plus". It is a series of proposals that includes everything I released in January, plus much more. I would like to quickly go through some of the specific proposals I hope to take to the committee. Hopefully we can have unanimous consent to bring them back to the House by June 1.

The building trust document talked about: free votes; the ethics counsellor becoming a true officer of parliament; the process of how the Speaker is elected; the creation of a new privacy, access and ethics committee, which I think would be in all of our interests; how the appointment of House officers is done; and the appointment of the clerk as an appointment of the House instead of an appointment of the executive, and so on. There is a whole series of proposals which I think would strengthen the role of parliament instead of just strengthening the government.

There are other things I would like to throw into the mix. We should have more of the opposition party members chairing committees, like they do in England. When I told them in England that virtually every single committee is chaired by the government, they just could not believe it. In England, a third of the chairs of committees are given to opposition members. This would make committees so much better in the sense that people would understand that our duty in committees is to discuss the subject matter, not to have political diatribes. If the government shafts one committee and the opposition is chairing the other committee, it

could be tit for tat. There is no value in making committees dysfunctional because there is an interest in making them work. Sharing the committee chairs with the opposition means sharing some of the power, but it also means balancing that power in a way that reflects the true representation here in the House.

As well, we are keen to televise committees. I know eventually we are going to have a new committee building in these precincts, but in the meantime anything we can do to televise more committees, to show members of parliament busily doing some of the grunt work of parliament, is a good thing, and we should encourage it.

In regard to the way the government responds to committee reports, I know the government House leader would like to have an automatic response, but I would point out to him that in the new government of Nunavut, for example, when a committee tables a report in its legislature and the minister does not respond within a certain number of days, it is deemed adopted. Instead of restricting the report, saying that concurrence is as if there had already been a debate, and the government being given unlimited time to respond, in Nunavut they say that the minister has to do that report's bidding unless he or she tables a response to do otherwise.

In other words, it is negative option billing on the minister. He or she responds to the committee's recommendations or it is a done deal. That strengthens the hands of committees. It strengthens the value of the report. Ministers who say they will just ignore reports will find out that their departments have been given direction by the House if they have failed to react within an appropriate time.

We have a lot of recommendations on closure. I have always said that the government at times will use closure if some shenanigans are going on in the opposition and it has to move that way. On rare occasions it is understandable. However, in return, the government should have to produce the minister to the House of Commons for a period of questioning on why it has restricted debate, on why it thinks debate has gone on long enough, on whether it has encouraged enough diversity in debate, and on why something is so time sensitive that it has to go through the House in such a hurried fashion. In other words, a minister should have to be accountable for bringing in a closure or time allocation motion. We have some specific proposals on that matter which I will be happy to bring forth.

• (1650)

We also want to bring forward changes in how the estimates are handled. There are good proposals from an all party committee on how to improve the estimates process. Right now the estimates are set in stone. The government brings them forward and members cannot change anything. If members change anything the government considers it a non-confidence vote. That is why the all party

committee, including the current government whip, has proposed changes, which I agree with and which will allow members of parliament to move funds around within a department, not to spend more money but to allocate funds according to the committee's wisdom.

That again strengthens the role of committees. It strengthens the role of the Liberal backbenchers and allows estimates, the real spending power of parliament, to be brought forward not just for scrutiny like they are now, but for actual direction to the government. What a breath of fresh air it would be for Liberal backbenchers to actually have that kind of input.

We want to also talk about things like the order paper questions. This is a technical thing on how those questions are answered and how timely the answers are. I know that the government House leader will be keen to do that.

We want to look at the parliamentary calendar. We want to decide on what is the best use of our time here in Ottawa. Can we make better use of Fridays? Instead of having attendance that is in the 20% to 30% range on Fridays, can we make better use of that time so the people who are in attendance in the House on Fridays have meaningful debate on meaningful subjects? Perhaps private members' business could have more pre-eminence. We can make better use of our Fridays in the House and I look forward to that debate as well.

On the subject of private members' business, in the Alliance Party we want any private members' business drawn for debate in the House to receive a vote. Too often people have put a lot of time, energy and effort into bringing forward private members' bills and, for whatever reasons, there are no votes. They are debated for an hour and then go off into the ether and are never heard of again. Members who have put time into a private member's initiative should know that there will be a vote and a decision at the end of it. We encourage all members to allow not just the debate but a vote to occur on private members' business. I think members on both sides of the House would look forward to that.

Again I want to emphasize that it is my belief that smaller committees will be more efficient committees. We need to look at committee structure instead of expanding committee membership to 17 or 18. Sometimes a joint committee has 25 or 30 members. How on earth can there be meaningful time for individual members on a committee of that size? We need to reflect the proportionality of the House, restrict the number of members on the committee, and look after the questions of voting and question and comment time. In other words, the time should reflect the proportionality. Let us find ways to deal with this.

Let us not just make the committees ever bigger. They are inefficient and a poor use of time and they do not do any better job of reflecting the reality of the House as far as numbers go. Often people get so discouraged that they quit attending because they never get a chance to speak.

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I look forward to this special committee. I am grateful for a chance to sit on it. I look forward in the weeks ahead to all members feeling free to talk to all House leaders about what is on their minds in order to make this place work better for the benefit of all of us and the Parliament of Canada.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: I wish to remind the House that the following three members will have a maximum of 20 minutes, and their speeches may be the subject of questions and comments for a period of ten minutes.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am particularly happy to speak today on this question.

First, I find it especially interesting that we can have a debate in this House in which all members may freely express their views on the standing orders requiring change or improvement in order to make our work in parliament more effective.

In this regard, it is a debate without party lines as such. Members may be creative, identify the irritants they see in the standing orders and propose solutions. It is no doubt with interest that the House leaders will consider what will happen here, what the members will present, and this will no doubt be very useful in improving our debates.

• (1655)

Second, I want to thank the government House leader, who was kind enough to guarantee that no change to the standing orders would be made without unanimity among the House leaders. If everyone does not agree on the benefit of a change, there will be no change.

I have already seen changes to the standing orders not made unanimously. It is extremely irritating to the members of a party when the rules change unbeknownst to them, without their having either the desire or the possibility of agreeing to the change. I therefore thank the government House leader.

I am, however, of the opinion that we, the House leaders of other parties, need to be responsible. There is always a certain give and take involved.

Although the government House leader is offering us this possibility of blocking changes that do not suit us, we must still be reasonable and must sometimes make an effort to compromise in order to obtain positive results, instead of seeking the slightest pretext to never agree with anything and end up with a reform that is really no reform at all.

We are all aware that the standing orders of the House of Commons need to be improved. We are all aware that certain avenues exist on which, I believe, we can reach agreement fairly readily.

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In this connection, I offer my co-operation in advance to the hon. leader of the government in the House and I want him to know that I will be pleased to try to contribute a great deal of positivity and open-mindedness and in a spirit of respect and promotion of the rights of all members of parliament, not on any partisan basis but on the basis of what I would call respect for the elected representatives that we are.

Certain principles, however, must underlie the reforms to the standing orders with which we will be involved and the work of the committee on which we will sit.

It must be understood that the standing orders of the House of Commons do not exist in order to make people's lives difficult and to stop them from expressing themselves. The rules that govern a Chamber like this one, a parliament, are there to allow a fair power relationship between the opposition and the government. A parliament where the government already enjoys an absolute majority, as is the case here, is fully capable of making decisions without having rules allowing it to do so without any interference whatsoever.

Of course there are rules so that the government can govern—and it is ultimately the objective pursued—but there are also rules allowing the opposition to slow down the government in its decision making process. When we feel that a decision is bad, we can slow down the government, we can make things more complicated for it, we can even question some bills on which there is no consensus, particularly when opposition parties work together and pool their resources.

If I say this, it is because it is significant. Our colleagues must realize that when a parliament no longer gives opposition parties an opportunity to prevent, through extraordinary means, the government from quietly proceeding with its bills and reforms, there is no parliament anymore. From the moment that a government enjoys an absolute majority, there would be nothing left to stop it, regardless of the initiatives that it may take. Such a situation would not be good.

When the public realizes that parliament no longer allows its elected representatives to slow down or block certain government initiatives, the opposition organizes itself at another level. Democracy moves to another sphere, because people realize that it is game over in parliament. People organize themselves in the streets, they hold rallies and use other means.

Whether we are government or opposition members, as is the case on our side of the House, it is in everyone's interest to ensure that the rules of the House give us some power to influence things.

I also want to discuss the spirit of the debates that take place in a parliament such as this one. We have been in a democratic system for a long time and this is probably why we tend not to realize the

richness of democracy, because we have been using it and sometimes abusing it.

● (1700)

There is one vital problem, when the government enters a debate in the House and the idea from the start is to carry the bill to term. I cannot stress enough how important it is for the government to listen to opposition members and to consider what is proposed. I know no members in the House who do not want to improve bills, in many respects, according to what their constituents ask them to do.

All too often, unfortunately, the debate, the period between the time the government introduces a bill and its passage, and the reading stages, second reading, report stage, third reading, are viewed all too often by the government as a necessary evil. The time between introduction and passage is a period of time that varies in length. It should be considered an extremely rich and fertile period to allow the government to improve its bill.

We know that bills are not prepared by the members of the House. They are prepared by impressive teams of officials. I am aware of all the responsibility borne by the ministers and all the teams and armies of officials, who come to them with initiatives, bills of 100 or 150 pages, who explain their initiatives and, finally, who try to promote their way of seeing things.

Ministers are sometimes obliged, not only in this parliament, but in all parliaments, to fight their own machine in order to say "The government does not want to go so far with this particular bill". There are epic battles between ministers and their own machines.

What needs to be understood is that government and opposition members alike form a kind of team, which sometimes has to do battle with armies of public servants. Our role is to make sure that the concerns of our constituents are expressed in the House. It is to take what the administrative machine proposes and say "That does not make sense. That should be in a particular order, or that should be done this way". Our role is to amend.

The rules of debate which we are going to amend, the standing orders, the practices and procedures will have to be amended such that the period of exchanges between government members, ministers and opposition members allows productive review, improvement and adaptation of what an extremely powerful administrative machine has pushed all the way through to parliament. This is the spirit in which I intend to work.

Naturally, I would like to talk about time allocation motions. If there is one thing which worries me, it is the extremely frequent recourse to such motions. Whenever time allocation is moved, I know that this is a convenient way for the government to move things forward.

But should the government have the right to use a time allocation motion if a bill has not been debated more than 12, 15 or even 20

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hours at most? It is not normal for the government to bring forward, after two or three hours of debate, a time allocation motion. Really now. That makes no sense. Is anyone ready to admit that there is nothing excessive about debating an important bill for three hours? As I have said, they are churned out by officials and we have to absorb their content, take them apart, analyze them and express our views on them.

The time we take here to debate bills gives the general public the opportunity to find out about the ones that concern them, to organize a lobby, to tell their MP "Hold on there, Mr. Member, we want to meet with you because there is a bill before parliament, before the House of Commons, and we want to see this or that change to it, because it causes us this or that problem".

The time allowed for discussing a bill must, therefore, be substantial if we are to do our jobs properly, if the public is to have time to react if there is something about it that does not suit it, and also if we are to demonstrate that the real objective of government is to improve a bill.

• (1705)

If this is not borne in mind, obviously things never move fast enough; they will never move fast enough. Perhaps in a few years the government will find an hour's debate on a bill too long and will invoke time allocation. That makes no sense.

The government has to return to fairer proportions on this. It must agree to the effort and sacrifice needed to allow members to debate. I am going to try to convince my colleagues, the leaders, that the government should not be able to bring forward time allocation too quickly in order to ensure quicker passage. This is perhaps one thing that needs to be looked at.

However it should not be used after three hours of debate, because the government House leader is in a bad mood and knows debate will probably be extended, so he brings forward a time allocation motion. This is not what parliament is about, this is not the point of a time allocation motion. However this is the way they now use it, unfortunately. I do not want to offend anyone and start a quarrel when we are having a positive debate on the rules, but everyone knows that the number of time allocation motions more than doubled from one government to the next.

So, at some point, it is time to be reasonable too, and I think that this is the time to have a look at this. I think the government House leader, a generally reasonable man, should want to look at this business honestly and give his opinion. I intend to raise issues in any case.

Perhaps it should not be usable until a certain amount of debating time has passed, and perhaps in exchange it could be made easier to pass, not take so long, or some such thing. There are some points that need looking into.

As for electronic voting, I do not want to come across as someone who is opposed to change, since I am in favour of modernizing the way we vote, but I do have certain reservations. That will most certainly be discussed in that committee.

There is a certain nobility and an infinite democracy in the fact that a member has to rise here in this House before the cameras and say in essence "I, Michel Gauthier, the member for Roberval, vote for or against this bill". There is a responsibility that goes with that.

So much so, that when a motion is presented that is an important one, not that there are any that are unimportant, but one that holds particular importance from a policy point of view, then we, and all parties have all done so, require a member by member vote, not applying one vote to another, as you specialized in at the time you were whip of your party, Mr. Speaker. Things go faster if that is done, and in many cases it is convenient for everyone. In certain cases, however, members were required to stand up.

I think we should find a system which would ensure that, to a certain degree, the act of voting would be one of courage. Otherwise, a member will become completely anonymous. We do not yet know what the system will be but he will come and press a button, or he will be in his office and vote with a card and it will show "Michel Gauthier, Roberval", "Yes or No", or "For the motion" or "Against the motion", or whatever, and it will be much less onerous for the member. It is this that worries me.

I know that we must move forward, but we must continue to require that a member have the courage of his convictions and be able to say publicly, "I voted for that, and I was not ashamed to do so". In certain cases, as we know only too well, members are sometimes absent for certain votes. They prefer not to be recorded as having voted for or against certain motions, particularly when they must toe the party line. This is because voting is an important act. If, when modernizing voting, we decide on electronic voting, we must come up with the best process possible, but it must be the one that makes members of this House as accountable as possible.

In addition, there are certain standing orders I wish to touch on briefly, because I see that my time is running out.

• (1710)

I do not think that the standing orders should be changed if, for instance, we do not have the support of two thirds of the members. It seems to me that the rules which govern us are too important to be passed by the government alone. That is the problem. The problem is that sometimes the government majority represents a large number of the members and there could be changes to the standing orders which only the government, not all opposition parties, wanted.

Perhaps it could be proportionate to the number of parties, or whatever, so that a change to the standing orders would have to

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reflect a certain consensus or unanimity in the House. Finally, there is no point dreaming in technicolour. They should talk about a consensus or a vote in each of the parties, I do not know, but some mechanism must be found. This question requires attention.

Opposition days are important to me. I am going to try to convince my colleagues in this regard. There are not many opposition days. When a party presents a motion, by regulatory subterfuge, we have to prevent our motion from being diluted or substantially changed. We are obliged to divide our time, to present the motion, to speak ten minutes, to say "My colleague will speak during the ten minutes I have left". The other colleague rises and presents an insignificant motion to prevent the motion from being amended, diluted or transformed significantly.

It seems to me that opposition days are held to enable each party, and we all have our own days, to speak to an issue that interests us.

I think, therefore, that the government should agree to allow an opposition motion to be amended only by the party presenting it so that there is no need to resort to subterfuge to protect a motion. We do it indirectly, and that complicates things. Why not be honest and let an opposition day belong to the opposition, be it the Bloc Québécois, the Canadian Alliance, the NDP or the Progressive Conservative Party, and let each party be master of its motion, which may no longer be amended at any point during the debate. This is something to look at.

We are also going to talk about the coverage of debates and about emergency debates that should, in my opinion, all be voted on. The reason a matter is discussed here in this House during an emergency debate is that it is something important. What could be more natural than to ask parliament to decide? I think this ought to be addressed as well.

In closing, as fair as the chairs and vice chairs of committees are concerned, we should take a page from the book of the Quebec national assembly. Half of all committees are headed by a member of the government party, and the other half by someone from the opposition. The vice chairs are the opposite. If a government member chairs the committee, then the vice chair is from the opposition and vice versa. This would provide more of a balance for a healthy democracy.

I have already experienced this in the Quebec national assembly. I can tell hon. members that it works very well, gets a large number of MNAs involved, and gives rise to some extremely interesting situations as far as the dynamism of the debate and the operation of parliament are concerned. Instead of having all but two committees chaired by someone from the party in power, I would like to see a better balance.

These are some of the matters we will be looking at, but my point was mainly to stress that we must approach all this within a

perspective of openness and intelligence, hoping to see parliament operate better and better, and that all MPs, not just those in government, will be able to do a more effective job in this House.

That is the spirit which will govern my contribution.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his very positive intervention in the House. I would like to ask the member a question on the issue of chairing committees.

Under the present situation there is a designated number of members from each party on committees. In the event an opposition member became the chair of a committee, it would appear to me that it would put the opposition at a further disadvantage, in terms of having the sufficient numbers to pass motions, because it would be giving up one more opposition spot.

• (1715)

Is the member suggesting that, in addition to providing for more opposition members, additional membership of opposition members should have to be provided for to maintain the parity that they presently have with regard to committee membership?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Gauthier: Mr. Speaker, I am not an expert on how committees work, but it does not take much good faith to know that the system is not unrealistic, because it does in fact exist.

If the system did not exist, I would agree with the hon. member that this would perhaps cause complications. However this system already exists in the Quebec national assembly and has many benefits, including that of making all members, including opposition members, accountable.

I do not know by what means they manage to solve the problems the member is raising, but I think that a reform such as the one we are undertaking should get us thinking about what is done elsewhere and what works well.

We have officers in the House, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to one who was formerly a member of the Quebec national assembly. When I was a member, he was a committee secretary, and a good one at that. He is much more familiar with the way committees work than I am.

In my opinion, we have the resources and the opportunity to go and see what is being done elsewhere, and it would be in our interest to be open to such things. It is more motivating and more interesting for everyone, and leads to good involvement in the work of committees.

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That having been said, implementing such a system could mean some difficult times, but since nature abhors a mess and since parliamentarians are intelligent beings, I imagine there will be certain adjustments and amendments and gradually the adjustment will be made.

On that score I would not worry. My suggestion to the hon. member would be that we at least see how it is done elsewhere. It would perhaps be in our interest to use this method here, because it would perhaps be to everyone's benefit.

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to participate in the debate. I hope that when students of parliament look back on this day, or look back on the committee that we are striking today, they will see it as the beginning of a process which went some way toward reforming parliament in the way that so many of us want parliament to be reformed.

I deliberately used the word reform, even though I know the official name of the committee is the committee to modernize parliament. This is a conceptual concession that we all made to the government House leader because he would rather talk about modernizing the House of Commons than reforming it. I would rather talk about reforming it than modernizing it.

One of the things that will be critical to the work of the committee is the tension between modernization and reformation. Modernization can have its own merits. There are things that we can do more efficiently. There are things that we can change to make our lives around here less awkward or irritating, but reform of the House of Commons is another matter.

When I talk about the reform of the House of Commons, I am not just talking about tinkering with the standing orders in order to make things more efficient. I and I think a lot of members of parliament are talking about redistributing power within the parliamentary system and within the parliamentary culture.

• (1720)

Any parliamentary reform worthy of its name will have as its object and as its result the redistribution of power so that the powerlessness which so many members of parliament feel, both individually and collectively, will be adequately addressed. If the committee fails to do that it will have failed miserably. It may indeed fail totally because from where I sit and given the fact that unanimous consent will be required for anything to come forward from the committee, if there is not some redistribution of power then there will not be any committee report.

There is only so much power one can redistribute by changing the standing orders in any event. It will not be that there is some big

change we can make in this place by changing the standing orders, but we can do a number of things both symbolically and practically to give members of parliament, as individuals on committees, collectively as committees, and individually and collectively in the House of Commons, a bit more freedom, a bit more distance from the influences which now often prevent them from acting with the freedom many of their voters would like them to exercise and which many members of parliament would like to exercise themselves.

The first thing we need to do is to change our view of delay. It seems to me we have been caught up in kind of a very modern notion that everything should happen quickly and efficiently. One of the things we have missed in all this is the importance of delay.

Delay is not just obstruction. Delay is not just being miserable or partisan. When something important is being done by the government, delay is an important aspect of democracy so that things can be dragged on in parliament, to use the pejorative. Things drag on here until such time as the opposition, the media and others can help Canadians to know what is going on here, what the government is about to do, what the government is up to, so that they can then respond and give some feedback. At a certain point the opposition has to make judgments about whether the task has been achieved or whether it is now overachieved and delay is counter-productive.

All those kinds of judgments were operative when I got here in many respects. They have been removed from this place. If something is important, boom, we have time allocation within a day or two. Then it is off to committee instead of letting the debate go on, having the debate noticed by the media because it is not always noticed right away, and playing a kind of parliamentary chicken with public opinion. That has disappeared. We have time allocation far too often and far too easily without any thought being given to what it is doing to our parliamentary culture.

On behalf of the NDP I will certainly be interested in a number of ways in which we could restrict the use of time allocation or make its use more beneficial to parliament. We could give the Speaker more authority. We could have a system whereby time allocation motions would have to be debated, as they were in the past. We could have some special responsibility that the government would have to exercise by having a minister explain for 30 minutes, an hour or something why the government wanted to move time allocation. There should be some price to be paid by the government for use and particularly overuse of time allocation.

By way of reaffirming the role of parliament and the role of members of parliament, we need to restore the Chamber to its proper place in the business of the nation. In recent days a number of questions of privilege and points of order have been raised having to do with the fact that so much takes place outside the House, that the media are given special privileges in terms of

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knowing about things before the House is notified, before documents or legislation is revealed in the House.

We need to go back to a time when the House was used more often for ministerial statements and was place where announcements were made, where policy was announced.

• (1725)

That happened in my parliamentary lifetime. It did not happen enough. This is an old debate, but there was a time when ministers made more ministerial statements than they do now and the opposition was able to respond. The media and others came to the House to find out what would happen on a particular issue, for example, an announcement by the minister of external affairs.

I say that with due respect to my colleague on my left who is now the leader of the Conservative Party. When he was the minister of external affairs I remember him making these ministerial statements in the House because I was his critic at that time and I remember responding to them. That does not happen very often any more and we need to have more of that.

That is related to another issue which perhaps the committee cannot completely remedy on its own by just amending the standing orders: the fact that this is one of the few parliaments in the world where treaties are not ratified in any kind of mandatory or regular way.

Canada is the only NATO country that had no debate on changes to the NATO treaty which expanded NATO to include three other countries. All other NATO countries, 14 out of 15, had debates in their national parliaments, but in Canada it was by order in council and that was it. That is not good enough.

We need to make this place a place where important decisions are taken and ratified. These sorts of take note debates that we have do not cut it. We will have one on the free trade agreement of the Americas next week. We will debate it without the text. We do not even know what we are debating. We could not get the government to promise when there actually is an agreement, and hopefully there will not be, that it will be debated and ratified in the House. We need to restore the place of the House of Commons in the life of the nation.

We also need to improve the standing committees of the House. Here is where we can begin to chip away at the false culture of confidence which the government and its members hide behind. They were doing it the other day when they were giving explanations for why they did not vote for the opposition day motion with respect to agriculture.

I say, for heaven's sake, the McGrath committee recommended in 1985 that all language of confidence be taken out of the standing orders because it used to be there with respect to opposition day

motions, and it was taken out. It was taken out 15 years ago. Yet 15 years later we still have government members saying that they would love to vote for a motion but they cannot because it is a matter of confidence. That is procedural BS.

There is nothing in the standing orders that prohibits any government member from voting for any opposition day motion. The only thing that prevents them is the political culture which exists within their own party and the political culture which exists within the larger political culture. People do not want to be blackballed. They do not want to put themselves in a position of being disciplined or being set aside in terms of career or whatever.

We could change the culture of confidence or the convention of confidence, if we want to call it that. We could change it tomorrow. If 25 members of the Liberal Party rose and voted against the government on any given piece of legislation or opposition day motion, as long as it was not a budget or a throne speech debate, we would have the Prime Minister in here the next day explaining parliamentary freedom.

He would be explaining about how it was not a motion of confidence, how they were to move a motion of confidence later that afternoon and how the bill that was defeated would have to be revisited at another time or be redrafted. This happens in other parliaments. It happened in this parliament years and years ago. There was a very good article in the newspaper today by Jack McLeod who pointed out that this used to happen with some regularity a long time ago in this parliament.

• (1730)

We need to return to the kind of culture where prime ministers do not regard each and every jot or tittle and piece of legislation as critical to their parliamentary or political egos. The same goes for opposition leaders. If we do not do that we will not be addressing what the Canadian people find inadequate about this place.

We could start in committee. We could start by going back to the recommendations in the McGrath committee and saying that when people are appointed to committee they are appointed for the duration of a session or perhaps the whole parliament.

Let us start with a session. They could not be removed by their party whip no matter how they voted. No matter how smart or stupid or independent or whatever they were, they could not be removed. They would have the power to replace themselves if they were absent, but there would be no more parliamentary goon squads. There would be no more pulling all government members off committees and putting in a bunch of people who do not know what they are doing and are just doing what the parliamentary secretary gave them the nod to do.

That brings me to another matter: taking parliamentary secretaries off committees. That was recommended by the McGrath

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committee. It was tried for a while and then dropped because governments did not like it.

Another is non-partisan secret ballot election of chairs, not just government members for chairs but opposition members. We all know who are the good chairpersons in parliament. Why can we not elect those people to chair our committees? Why can we not elect those people to make committees work the way people want committees to work, instead of having the chairmanship of committees sometimes regarded as a perk or a step on the way up the government ladder?

That is not to say we do not have good chairs of committees. I see the member for Davenport, who has always been an excellent chair, but I have been on committees with some real losers too, real losers who should never have chaired a committee no matter what kind of committee it was.

We could start with the committee process by giving individual members more freedom from their whips and by electing chairs at the beginning of the life of committees that have the respect of members of the committees.

When committee reports come to the House we need to show more respect for the work of the committees. I have seen far too many unanimous reports of committees absolutely ignored by government.

One report that comes to mind, which has always been a special irritant for me, was from the standing committee on transport which considered the VIA rail cuts of January 15, 1990, and came back with a unanimous recommendation to the House that it was a wrong and terrible thing to do. The Conservative government of the day, just so the Liberals do not think I spend all my time on them, ignored that unanimous recommendation of the committee headed by Mr. Pat Nowlan. I think I have said enough about committees for now.

We need to look at revising the standing orders to reflect the fact that we have five parties in the House. This is more of a caretaking thing, but it has been a number of years and we still have not done it.

For instance, we have a routine with respect to the first round of speeches. The standing order says what the first three speeches will be. That is there because when the standing order was written there were three parties. We now have five parties in parliament. Is it not about time we adjusted the standing order so that it now says five speeches because there are five parties? A parliament that is not capable of updating of its standing orders is hardly worth the name.

There are a number of other things having to do with amendments and subamendments on motions, having to do with the throne speech, the budget, et cetera, which do not make any provisions for the fourth and fifth parties to contribute by way of amendment. These things have to do with updating the reality of a five party parliament.

Perhaps we could so amend the standing orders that we would not have to change them to reflect the number of parties. I am sure there is language that would allow the standing orders to be interpreted from parliament to parliament, without having to be changed, to give equality to all parties in respect of the things I have mentioned.

Those are just a few things. We will bring many more things to the committee process. I am very hopeful this will be the beginning of something that in retrospect will be regarded as a bit of a breakthrough, but I also remain skeptical.

• (1735)

I hope the government House leader will try to look at the issue a little deeper than he did today in his remarks. Most of what he had to say was directed toward making this place more efficient, more modern and more convenient for members. He talked about televising committees and that sort of thing.

We will look at that sort of thing, but the quality of democracy does not ride on whether we televise committees. The quality of democracy in this place rides on the quality of what we are televising, not on the fact that we are televising it. Of course it is a moot point whether the broadcasting of committees will increase the quality of what goes on in them or whether it will reproduce the kind of silliness we see here in question period when people are looking for the clip.

Much damage has been done to democracy in the country by looking for the ever diminishing clip on the national news. Do we want to reproduce that in committee, or do we want to think very hard about changing our committee structure and our committee culture first and then maybe having something that would be more worth broadcasting?

On a matter that is critical to our discussion here the government House leader said he did not want to talk about the matter of confidence. He did say he was open to other suggestions, which is fair enough. Nothing he raised would in any way call into question the way the confidence convention is interpreted on that side of the House or, for that matter, interpreted generally sometimes. He said it was a constitutional question, so he did not want to get into it.

I do not think it is a constitutional question. The only thing that is constitutional is that the government must have the confidence of the House. That is a constitutional matter, which is fair enough, but within that constitutional stipulation there is all kinds of room for interpretation and all kinds of precedent because ultimately, 99 times out of 100, the matter of confidence is a political matter, not a constitutional matter. It is a political matter that can be changed by political agreement and political action. If this committee can do

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anything to change that it will have done Canada a great service. That will certainly be one of the things I will be looking for.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

Hon. Hedy Fry (Secretary of State (Multiculturalism)(Status of Women), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today in question period I made reference in my answer to an incident in Prince George, British Columbia. I would like to clarify it because I had to leave the House early and was not here for the discussion. May I have the opportunity to do so?

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I am responding to the point of order. In British Columbia there have been incidents of hate crime, including cross burnings. I know of this because I was contacted immediately that these incidents occurred by the mayor of Prince George.

In my position as Secretary of State for Multiculturalism I funded the mayor to set up a task force right away. The community was duly concerned and duly appalled at the incident and demanded to take immediate action, so I funded the mayor to hold a task force. The task force met and came out with some remarkable and courageous recommendations which the mayor is implementing.

What I am highlighting is that these incidents occur. In my role as secretary of state I am often very astounded at the rapidity with which municipalities and communities take action against such things. It is my role to sometimes assist them with resources. I did so, so I know very clearly and personally of the incident in Prince George.

I was recently in Prince George, where I met with the task force and congratulated the mayor and the people of Prince George for taking immediate action on incidents that could happen in communities anywhere in Canada.

• (1740)

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Calgary Centre, PC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on the same point of order. I heard the minister speak in the House. She referred to crosses burning as we speak. Her response did not address that question.

It would be in the interest of everyone, and it certainly would respect the spirit of this parliamentary debate, if she simply apologized and withdrew that inaccurate remark.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Mr. Speaker, I would be very pleased to remove the piece, as we speak. Sometimes when we speak in the House of Commons we put some of our phrases before and after.

However this was a recent incident. What I meant to say was that as we speak things are happening around the world and in Canada and in Prince George that are changing things. I would be very pleased to withdraw the phrase as we speak and say recent.

The Deputy Speaker: I accept that withdrawal.

Miss Deborah Grey (Edmonton North, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, the secretary of state talks about making sure racism does not happen. We appreciate that because it is a dreadful thing.

What she said today was very clearly that they were burning crosses in Prince George as we speak. She has given some sort of half-baked withdrawal, but she slammed—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

The Deputy Speaker: I consider the matter closed following the withdrawal by the minister. If it is on another issue and another point of order, the hon. member for Provencher may rise.

Mr. Vic Toews (Provencher, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a new point of order arising out of the comments the hon. member made.

The hon. member may well have withdrawn, and I am not clear whether she did in fact withdraw, the comment that crosses are now burning in Prince George. However the issue is not simply a matter of withdrawing the words. It is a matter of apologizing to the community because she slammed the entire community and that needs to be withdrawn.

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I still consider the matter closed. We all take each other's words as being honourable. When one of our members withdraws a statement, as was the case here, then I accept the withdrawal. I am prepared to move on to another matter as of now.

* * *

**MODERNIZATION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS
PROCEDURE**

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we just heard from the hon. member for Winnipeg—Transcona. Members will probably know him well because of his long service to the House, and in terms of a thermometer of earned respect he has certainly earned a great deal here.

He raised an issue about chairs of committees. I would like him to know, and I think most members in this place would agree, that

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all parliamentarians win when we have good, solid chairs in our committees. I tend to agree with his assessment.

He also postulated that delay is an important aspect of democracy. I agree with him there as well. Even though he is quite right that at this point that it looks like a process of fine tuning and tinkering with standing orders, with the hon. member participating on the committee I am sure important things can happen and I hope he will pursue them.

My question for the member has to do with the spirit. He started his speech by saying we should not be going through a process of tinkering. What he said we should instead be doing, and he was spot on, is talking about the issue of redistribution of power.

• (1745)

I believe the member is absolutely correct. That is exactly what is on the minds of opposition parliamentarians. They want to redistribute power, because in our parliamentary system, constitutional obligations, et cetera, the power is vested in a majority government elected to govern. The opposition has a role to play—and maybe the hon. member will comment—and the role of the opposition, in my view, is to deliver blows that would tenderize a turtle. I do not believe they have a mandate to govern, yet the member is quite right, and I know where he is coming from: redistribution of power is the issue.

If constitutionally a majority government is required to deliver on a mandate, would it in fact be in the best interests of our parliamentary system to structure its affairs in such a way that a government would be pre-empted in any way from delivering on a mandate, which it was democratically elected to do?

Mr. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, I am not trying to be nasty about it, but if this is the sort of level of insight about parliament on the government backbench, it is no wonder we do not have the rebellion that we should have over there.

I was not talking about redistribution of power between government and opposition, although I think there is room for that. I was talking about redistribution of power between the PMO and the cabinet, the cabinet and the caucus, the government and its own backbenchers, the executive and the House of Commons. If all the member heard was me talking about redistributing power between the government and the opposition, I have to go back and read my speech, or perhaps he should go back and read my speech, because that is certainly not what I was concentrating on.

To return to what I said at the beginning, real parliamentary reform has to do with redistributing power in a number of ways around here. One of those ways is between government and the opposition, because over the years much more power has come to

reside with the government as opposed to the opposition than used to be the case. I am not asking for something that never was or never could be. I am asking for something that used to be. I am asking for a return to some balance, where the opposition has much more power to hold the government to account than it now does. I do not think that is a violation of any kind of constitutional theory about government.

The government is accountable to parliament. When people go to the polls they do not just elect a government; they elect a parliament. It is out of parliament that governments come. It is not just majority governments. The member said in his question to me that we must have a majority government in order to fulfil this constitutional mandate. No, we do not. We just need to have a government that has the confidence of the House, and that could be a minority government, a coalition government or a number of different combinations, many of which would be much more sensitive to and responsive to the opinions of the opposition and the opinions of the government backbench than what we now have.

We need a situation in which the government does not have as much power to punish its own members and to override the opposition, so that there is some need there for agreement and co-operation. That way other points of view get into the mix and they get into amendments that are accepted rather than rejected. We get better legislation and better policy as a result.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, I commend the hon. member, the House leader for the New Democratic Party. He always brings much logic and common sense to the debate. He is a long serving member of the House. That is not to infer he is long in the tooth. He is well respected by all who know him.

My question to the hon. member is with respect to the devolution, if you will, of some powers, even to the Speaker on occasion. I specifically refer to instances where omnibus bills are put before the House of Commons, where legislation is mixed and mashed together in an incoherent fashion, where members of the opposition most times—and this is equally applicable to members of the backbench—are forced to vote against a bill they are predominantly in favour of or, similarly, to vote for something they cannot reconcile.

• (1750)

Would it be fair to suggest that there are occasions when the Speaker might be empowered to intervene and to divide omnibus bills? Similarly, are there occasions when the Speaker might also be empowered to have greater discretion to turn down the use of closure or time allocation where it is not properly being exercised by the government, or to at least to call for a debate where the

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government should be called upon to justify the use of time allocation or the use of closure? I wonder if the hon. member would have comments on those suggestions.

Mr. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, in regard to the last two suggestions made with respect to dealing with time allocation and giving the Chair more power, I did mention them fleetingly in my remarks about time allocation. It is one of the things I said in the debate. The government is very eager to give the Chair power over what amendments would be votable at report stage, but not so eager to give the Speaker power to hear motions of time allocation which, in the judgment of the Chair, come too early or before adequate debate has taken place.

The first question was on omnibus bills. This is probably an occasion for me to give a brief history lesson, without wanting to look too long in the tooth. Perhaps the Minister of Transport will remember this, and so would the leader of the Conservative Party. It was out of an omnibus bill that a first good wave of parliamentary reform came, with the bell ringing incident in 1982 that was in response to an omnibus piece of energy legislation. The Lefebvre committee was created.

Contrary to what the government House leader said earlier, the Lefebvre committee came at the end of a parliament. The government House leader said he thought that reform always came at the beginning of a parliament, but there was actually quite a bit of reform that came at the end of the parliament of 1980 to 1984 as a result of the committee that was struck out of the bell ringing incident.

The Minister of Transport was on that committee and will perhaps confirm to the government House leader what a wonderful job he did at that time in helping other members come forward with parliamentary reforms. Those reforms were built on by the McGrath committee. The first report of the McGrath committee basically said to adopt the Lefebvre committee recommendations.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, one of the problems Canadians have is the appointment of people, mostly political hacks, to very sensitive positions within various departments in Canada. Would the member agree that some of those people who are appointed should appear before the respective committee, with their CVs, for a peer review, in order for members to see if they truly are qualified for the jobs or are just political appointments?

Mr. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, that was something I did not get to. Again, I hate to sound like a broken record, but if hon. members go back to the McGrath committee report they will see what we recommended for a lot of appointments, such as appointments of House officers and appointments to the National Energy Board at the time, to the CRTC, to the CBC and to the boards of crown corporations, both for chair and for board members in some

instances. We recommended that they be brought before the appropriate parliamentary committees, not just for questioning but in some cases actually for ratification, if I remember the recommendations correctly. This would be another way for members of parliament to become more involved.

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Calgary Centre, PC): Mr. Speaker, I intend to share my time, if I can speak quickly enough, with my colleague and House leader, the member of parliament for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough.

Let me be clear. I think this institution is in very significant trouble. It is appropriate that we should look at the procedural changes that are proposed here. We will try that. I think the government should know, and I believe I am speaking on behalf of private members of many parties, that if this process does not work there is a growing will in the House to find some other way that will work, because the status quo in the House of Commons is no longer adequate. It does not attract the respect and the sense of legitimacy that the House of Commons needs. It is not accepted by the people of the country. Increasingly, it is not accepted here.

● (1755)

I want to start with what may be seen by some as a revolutionary principle. I believe that if parliament works better, government can work better. Of course there is going to be an adversarial relationship between the House of Commons and the government, and the member for Winnipeg—Transcona was absolutely right. What people vote for is a parliament. They do not necessarily vote for a government. What we are here to do is to hold a government accountable and also to ensure that the government best reflects the interests and the sensitivities of the country. That can be done through a strong parliament.

I hope that there will be some inspiration taken from the work of the McGrath committee by the members of the committee here. I want to speak for just a moment about legitimacy.

[*Translation*]

I think the success or failure of democratic systems depends on the public's willingness to support or accept decisions made in the name of democracy. Canadians are prepared to make difficult decisions, but they want to shape them. To do so, they must have confidence in their leaders.

Just as we need wealth in order to prosper, we need confidence to govern. These days, both are lacking. Our objective in these discussions must be to find the means to rebuild confidence in public institutions, to revive a feeling of legitimacy that will mobilize Canadians.

[*English*]

That is for three reasons. First, at the end of the day, the House of Commons is our most important institution. It has power over the

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courts, over cabinets and over constitutions. Let me in passing dismiss the notion that there is something unconstitutional about dealing with questions of confidence on the floor of the House. Second, this is the only Canadian institution to which each citizen in each corner of Canada feels connected. Third, the House of Commons may be the last existing pan-Canadian institution. More than ever, this diverse, blessed and difficult community needs institutions it can respect and hold in common and we in this House are losing that capacity now.

I believe the House is seriously broken and I want to make the case that this is no government's fault. Perhaps the best way I could do that is to identify three mistakes that were made, of which I was part, at least three, and there were no doubt many more. The most important, I think, had to do with the change with regard to the control of estimates. Last night we sat through a system where, in the twinkling of an eye, we approved the spending of billions of dollars. That should not happen that easily. That should not happen that automatically.

I was part of a parliament, an adviser to a leader of a party who, in the name of efficiency, changed the rules of control by Committee of the Whole. That was a mistake. We should recognize that it was a mistake. We should not consider that because that is the status quo now, we are somehow bound to accept it. We have to go back to some control of spending or parliament will never have any purpose. At the end of the day, if we do not have the power to control spending, we have power over nothing at all.

Second, to come to a point raised by my colleague from Winnipeg—Transcona, I was a member of a government—and we in that government were wrong—that changed a decision we had earlier taken and reinstated parliamentary secretaries to committees. They should not be there. They threaten the independence of the committee. The McGrath committee report, which we briefly accepted at the time, was right.

I make this point not because I like to admit mistakes, but because I think that if we are going to get anywhere in the debate we have to recognize that the present state of the House is not the fault of any one party. It is a collective fault and the repair will come only if there is a collective will to try to change the House.

When I was first sitting in the galleries and watching the House, sitting right down about here were a couple a members of a party that I think was then called the CCF. They used their power with respect to divorce bills to deny unanimous consent to the House of Commons to force a change in the law of divorce. It was too sensitive for governments to deal with as a matter of initiative, but those two members of parliament at the time, Mr. William Peters and Mr. Frank Howard, used that power, which no member of parliament now has, to deny unanimous consent on individual members and to force a change in the law of Canada. Did that incapacitate the Government of Canada? No. Did it force it to respond to public current attitudes of the country? Yes. What is

parliament to do? It should be to force governments to pay attention to where the people are.

• (1800)

We have made mistakes in the past. We have to recognize that if we are going to make this institution relevant. We have to be prepared to admit those mistakes and make very fundamental changes.

During my participation in the debate to the throne speech, I outlined a way that I would deal with what I believed was one of the most major of the recent failures of this parliament. It had to do with committee of the whole House and control of government spending.

My own view as to how we could do that may not work but I would like it looked at. I would empower the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition to choose two departments a year. Their estimates would be considered without any time limit and without let or hindrance. There would not be any government spending approved until every member of parliament had approved the estimates of those two departments. It would be done in committee of the whole House. It would be understood that the choice by the Leader of the Opposition would not be made until the day before the examination began so that every department would have to prepare, assuming that it would be examined.

I believe that would work. If it would not work in committee of the whole House, I believe some variant that would allow a committee of supply to sit in an alternate Chamber would work. We have to admit that four decades ago we made a mistake and restore to the House some capacity for control of spending.

I want to speak very quickly on a matter which my colleagues would make clear I speak only for myself. It involves a quite significant change in the relationship between government and the House of Commons.

It is time to challenge a central assumption about the House of Commons, namely the assumption that the power to initiate legislation should rest almost exclusively with cabinet and that the principal role of the rest of parliament is simply to hold cabinet accountable. In practical terms that means that cabinet governs and the rest of parliament simply approves or disapproves.

Cabinet is at the centre of the decisions and the rest of parliament is at the margins, whether as members of a government caucus who can often change the details of a proposal but rarely change its substance, or as members of an opposition party whose amendments or criticisms can sometimes, but not very often, bring a change. We do not have parliamentary government. We have cabinet government in a parliamentary system. We have to make some very significant moves away from that. One way would be through more free votes.

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On the question of cabinet government, let me quote from a recent article by Eric Kierans, a distinguished former member of the House and a former member of the Trudeau government. He was commenting on events 30 years ago, but current today. He said:

Canada today is run by the Prime Minister's Office and Privy Council Office, whose mandarins instruct the elected members as to what they should do and say, and what opinions they must support.

The notion that the prime minister is *primus inter pares*—first among equals—which appears in every textbook on political science, has become a lame joke. The prime minister has no equals, nor any who can remotely aspire to be equal except by taking over the job.

The position is more like a president than a prime minister, but within a system not designed for such overwhelming centralized control, and in a regionalized nation where such control is not merely awkward, but dangerous to the public weal.

So spoke Eric Kierans. He is absolutely right. We have to take account of the extraordinary dangerous power that any prime minister, whether a prime minister from Shawinigan or a prime minister from Calgary Centre, holds. That simply has to be changed if this system is going to be valid again.

I would ask the House to consider a concept. Let us distinguish between two broad categories of the policy questions the House of Commons considers. One set involves issues which are without question life and death issues to a modern nation in a competitive world and where a government must be able to act quickly and decisively. Those would include economic and fiscal policy, trade policy, federal-provincial-territorial relations, basic foreign policy, some legal matters and some others. The list would have to be drawn very carefully. An accountable government responsible to parliament should be the principal source and author of policy on those questions.

However there is a second category of issues which, while unquestionably important, are not at the core of a government's ability to lead and protect the nation. Moreover, in some of these fields more imaginative and more appropriate policy may come from sources outside government. That could be the case, for example, with issues relating to Indian affairs, the environment, the fishery, agriculture and to other policy fields. In those cases a principal source and author of policy should be an all-party committee of the House of Commons empowered to work directly with public servants and to call upon the best advice of the community. Indeed a process like that may yield better and more pertinent legislation than would a government which regards those issues as simply secondary to its mandate.

● (1805)

In effect we already distinguish between issues which are more important to a government and issues which are less. In lower priority ministries, if good ideas come forward from the public

servants of parliament they are more likely to be shunted aside in the privacy of the Prime Minister's office. Moreover, as I know from experience, governments fall on large issues like budgets, not on more ordinary questions. So we already distinguish between categories of issues.

This proposal would make much better use of the talent and experience of the men and women chosen by their neighbours to serve in the House of Commons. We are wasting that talent and experience today, and we have been for some time. In my consistent experience in the House of Commons in government and in opposition, any senior official in Ottawa has more influence over public policy than any elected member of parliament who is not in cabinet. That is wrong in our system. There has to be some very basic reforms undertaken if we are going to change that system.

I do not think that breaks the traditions of the application of modern parliamentary democracy to a modern society. Those are the sorts of things we have to look at.

Let me go to more specific matters. I am conscious of my time and do not want to intrude too much on my colleague.

I take the distinction made by my colleague from Winnipeg—Transcona. We are talking about reform here if we are talking about anything sensible, but modernization is also allowable. We should start by giving consideration for example to petitions that come by e-mail. The standing order requiring 25 signatures on a petition should be abandoned. There is no reason to be that exclusive. There is no reason why all motions on private members' and supply days should not be votable. What is the House about if we are not going to have the opportunity to vote?

There is no question that we need a stronger cadre of law with respect to the auditor general, the privacy commissioner, the information commissioner and the language commissioner. They should all have the status of being permanent witnesses to all committees and should be entitled to automatically comment on items of business before committees.

To go back to a matter raised a moment ago, the Speaker should have the power to refuse a closure motion and time allocation motions when the Speaker is of the opinion that the rights of a minority are being infringed upon. That is done in the United Kingdom. There is no reason why it cannot be done here. If we are interested in following the British example, let us follow the good examples that would empower parliament more than is the case now.

I would like to see more elections in the House. You, sir, as Deputy Speaker, should be elected. Other presiding officers should be elected in the same way that Mr. Speaker is elected.

There are a range of other specific changes that have to be undertaken. As someone who has been in government and who has been in opposition, as the only member on the opposition's side of the House who has been a Prime Minister and who has sat in the cabinet of Canada, I believe the Government of Canada has nothing to fear from the Parliament of Canada. Members who sit in cabinet have nothing to fear from the members of parliament who do not sit in cabinet.

If we respect the fundamental rights of individual members of parliament and if we shake our rules to reflect that respect, we will not only have a government what could command more legitimacy, that would be more in tune with the concerns of the people in the country, we will have a parliament that will draw out the better natures, not the darker natures, of the members of parliament here.

Mr. Myron Thompson (Wild Rose, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated the message I just heard. In 1993, when I was elected and came here for the first time, I knew things just were not right. After a couple of years I realized just how serious an effect the situation was having on good governance in the country.

I certainly concur with everything the hon. member has just indicated. For the life of me I cannot understand why, for example, on 74 occasions with Bill C-68 there were regulations and changes made by order in council. Was that what order in council was all about, to make off the cuff changes whenever it felt like it? Was there not a better purpose for that kind of situation to exist? Is judicial activism a result of the way this place has been operating over the years or did it come about by other reasons?

• (1810)

He talked about free votes. I would like to hear his comments on referendum, one of the most effective measures used in many democratic countries in the world. I would also like him to relate just a little more on free votes. I cannot for the life of me understand why a person who is elected to this place would stand in tears and vote against hepatitis C victims, as I saw in this place. What a disgrace to have to do that. I know they did not want to that.

I hope the hon. member takes no offence, but having been a conservative all my life and being part of the organization that helped elect Brian Mulroney in 1984, surely some of these things were beginning to become obvious. After nine years, why was something not done about it?

Right Hon. Joe Clark: Mr. Speaker, I could take partisan offence to the question, but I will not because it is a very good question. Part of the reason is, when we come to government we put on the clothes of government. Perhaps one of the perspectives I can bring to the House of Commons is as someone who has served

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in both government and in opposition, and has had an opportunity to look back on the attitudes that we bring in.

We feared free votes too much as a government. This government fears free votes too much. Free votes, in my judgment, among other things, impose an obligation upon individual members to act responsibly. My sense of the House is that if we treat members as being irresponsible they will act irresponsibly. My sense also is that if we treat members responsibly they will respond in a positive way. The attitude that we brought in, that governments bring in, fundamentally has to change.

I will say in our defence, we introduced the McGrath Committee. We undertook attempts to try to change things at the time. We also made significant mistakes. Unless this process begun today is prepared to take a look at root and branch changes, it will make another serious mistake. To quote the leader of the hon. member's party earlier today in the debate, what we will see is a continuing slide of public opinion with respect to this institution.

Canadians respect parliament less now than they did before. That is because this parliament has less power than it used to have or than it does in the textbooks that we use to teach Canadians. We have to change that.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I could the right hon. member briefly comment again on the aspect of redistribution of power and maybe try to bring some specificity or focus to the elements of power, which the member for Winnipeg—Transcona and he talked about, that would make these changes he is advocating.

Right Hon. Joe Clark: Mr. Speaker, first, there should be more free votes. That would provide more power to individual members of parliament.

Second, and a more radical idea, we should look very seriously at the idea of empowering standing committees in some fields with direct access to public service and professional advice so they can recommend policy on a much more regular basis in a category of issues that are not life and death issues to the government. That would give significantly more power.

Third, we cannot continue situations where, not to touch a raw nerve, an ethics counsellor does not report to this whole House. Officers of parliament should report to the whole parliament.

There is a range of areas in which the power of parliament, as a practical matter, could be increased without threatening the capacity of the government to establish its mandate on the central issues for which it was elected.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, I must say it is an intimidating task to follow the right hon. member for Calgary Centre. The tone he has set, his

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wisdom and the wisdom of other members that have been brought forward is very encouraging, particularly the commentary with respect to the recognition that all previous parliaments must shoulder the blame and responsibility for where we are today. Both good and bad changes have come about as part of the evolution of parliament. That is natural. We are a parliament that was borne out of the Westminster model. We have much that we can learn from the evolution that has occurred there, as well as in other models.

● (1815)

We all know that cynicism exists in some sectors, particularly among Canadians generally but also among many members of parliament, about the legitimacy of this exercise. As a committee, of which I will be a member, we will have to be mindful of that cynicism and produce good results.

We are off to a good start in terms of this debate. I congratulate the hon. House leader for the governing party for initiating this, for giving us this opportunity and for indicating that there could be more. That may very well come to pass.

This is a very important time because Canadians have begun to question not only the effectiveness of parliament but its relevance as well. It is a very serious condemnation of what we are here to do, which is to represent Canadians.

At the outset I want to indicate and put a caveat on some of the ideas that I will be putting before the House. When we go into this committee, it is to be understood that we are to improve upon, to hear from one another and to modify ideas that may be brought to the forefront.

Canada is struggling with this process of modernization, or reform. We are looking for ways to engage Canadians. One way we can do that, and one part and parcel step in the right direction, is to modernize parliament in terms of our use of technology. The hon. member for Winnipeg South has a great interest in this issue.

The hon. member for Calgary Centre referred to the filing of petitions through e-mail as a way in which we could engage Canadians in a full and open fashion.

Electronic records of the House should contain hyperlinks to those documents cited that are electronically available. We should try to increase this access if we are to engage Canadians and inform them about the important work that is done by their parliament. This would also help improve accountability. Canadians would be informed and they could observe and critique, in an open fashion, the workings of parliament. Surely this would improve upon the relevancy, upon their perception and upon the real importance that is placed on the work that is done.

There are some who think that parliamentarians themselves are losing their ability to be instruments of change. I do not believe that. I still believe in my heart of hearts that the originality and innovation that individuals could bring to parliament in their efforts and attempts to represent their constituents in an effective way can be enhanced and rewarding.

We have seen occasions where individual members have done yeoman service, in terms of bringing forward a private member's bill, and speaking out on occasion on an issue that may put them offside with their government or within their own parties, and it becomes a huge issue of consternation. Other members have spoken to the issue of how bad behaviour is sometimes put under the spotlight and, therefore, there is perhaps too much emphasis put on dissent. Of all the things that happen in the House of Commons, dissent should not be something that is foreign or necessarily frowned upon.

An hon. member: Encouraged.

Mr. Peter MacKay: The hon. member says encouraged and I agree with that.

When we talk about free votes and, the suggestion many have put forward, of having all private members' business made votable, these could be achieved by releasing some of the whipping tactics that are brought to bear on members by party whips. The government could also abandon its practice of putting confidence votes behind issues that really do not have to be confidence votes. Members should be allowed freer expression on issues that carry particularly moral implications for not only those members but for their constituents.

● (1820)

If we are to empower members to have the ability to command this respect, we have to give them actual practical access to those levers. If we are to energize and invigorate parliament, we have to take practical steps in that direction. I would suggest that there will be a number of very positive and innovative suggestions that will come forward not only in this debate but in the committee as well.

I will talk very briefly about the committee itself. There is some scepticism because it is comprised strictly of House officers in this instance and it will soon become known as the Kilger committee. Mr. Speaker, you will be presiding over it. We are to encourage the ideas, the House leader has expressed that spirit, and the inclusion of members in this process. The committee, I would suggest, if it is to have legitimacy, should be a reflection of all members and all parties.

The idea of wiring this place would allow greater public access. House records that should be in the public forum would certainly

be more available if they were on the Internet at all times. We should be wiring to the max.

Another clear example would be the ability to have *Debates* and committee proceedings made more readily available. The technology is there. It is a costly exercise but it is one that would bear fruit long into the future. We are slipping behind in the area of technology and the use that we make of it in parliament. We should be a shining example for other countries and other companies that are doing great things. We could learn from the technological advances that are being made in our country and in Silicon Valley not far from here. We have businesses that are competing in the highest leagues of the world and we should be engaging them to help us to make greater use of technology.

I have some specific recommendations I want to put on record. I know we will have a chance in committee to delve into them in more detail. One recommendation would be that we abolish the limit of four written questions per member. We should be allowed a greater number of questions on the order paper.

Another recommendation would be to put time limits back in place for the government to respond to those questions. It should be required to respond within a relatively short time, 15 or 30 days. It should not be the prolonged, dragged out affair that we have seen this exercise slide into.

The Speaker himself, as indicated earlier, should be given more powers on occasion to refuse closure motions or time allocation. The Speaker should also have the ability to ensure that the minority rights of members of parliament are being protected.

I agree with the comments made earlier that the Deputy Speaker should be elected by all members of the House of Commons, as should, on many occasions, chairmen of committees. Perhaps we should not elect all chairmen, but it is an exercise we could enter into gradually. Having chairmen elected would be a greater reflection of the neutrality and the non-partisanship of the committee, which is very much the spirit that should exist in the committee, away from the carnival atmosphere that we have seen question period become.

Another issue that I fully believe has to be explored is the issue of a code of conduct for members of parliament. It is a broad issue in and of itself, but if we are to expect a high standard, there are occasions where we will have to call to task bad behaviour and, in some instances, to have some teeth to punish. For example, if a member is suspended, and it is a rare occasion that it happens, their salary should be suspended to show that there is some discipline and some deterrent for bad behaviour.

There are many other examples that would enhance the credibility of parliamentarians. We should have an ethics committee. If we

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are to have an ethics counsellor, we should have a sitting committee with an elected chair that would examine breaches of a code of conduct.

With respect to officers of the House, who are there to serve all parliamentarians and to act on behalf of Canadians, such as the auditor general, the privacy commissioner, the information commissioner, the language commissioner, the ethics counsellor, they should all have a permanent status as witnesses on committees. They should be automatically commanded to appear before committees to give testimony on their important findings and deliberations.

● (1825)

With respect to witnesses on committees, we should consider having all witnesses give sworn testimony or affirm when they come before a committee. This would add greater relevancy and greater importance. It would stress the need for honesty, openness and integrity when witnesses come before a committee, not unlike what we see in the courts across the country.

Perhaps there are occasions when we should look at expanding the hours in which we sit. It was not uncommon in days gone by that the House of Commons would sit late into the night. We have done so in emergency situations. When we have crises in agriculture such as the ongoing potato wart epidemic in Prince Edward Island, as small as it is in terms of the actual epidemic but in terms of the ramifications which are causing such problems for those farmers, we should be able to sit late into the night if necessary to deliberate and talk about solutions.

There are many ways that we can improve upon the framework that parliament has embraced and come to practise in its important deliberations. We have to improve upon the framework that is there and build upon the foundation that has been laid down. We can do so in a non-partisan way.

The spirit exists and the time is right. I look forward to participating in the committee work. I will do my best on behalf of the members of my party and all members to bring original and honest ideas to this process.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his input into the debate. He is quite right in terms of the House leaders again taking the lead role. I am a backbencher and I am here because now is my chance to put my two cents in on some issues that are important to me.

If I had to pick one, it would be private members' business. The member talked about being agents of change. Private members' business seems to be an opportunity lost. Quite frankly it has been since 1993, since I have been here.

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The House was once seized with an issue where the resources available to private members were tremendously strained because so many members were bringing in bills. They were being drafted, researched and all the other things but were never tabled, even at first reading.

I wonder why we did not resolve that effectively. No matter how expeditiously we bring in a bill after it has been selected, we could not possibly get 10 bills through. Why do we allow members to put 10 bills on the order paper when it is not possible to get them through? Why can members reserve a subject matter and restrict the opportunity of another member who has the same kind of idea but cannot bring it forward because someone got it in the day before? Why is it that we do not have questions and comments on private members' debate?

When I am on duty just before the late show, why do I have to sit here and listen to designated people speak when somebody may have twigged on something that I want to know more about, or they may have said something that is quite frankly outrageous and I want to say so?

If he wants to be an agent of change, I hope he gives us the undertaking right now that when he goes to the committee of House leaders he will in fact be an agent of change himself. Maybe he will pick up the ball for all of us on private members' business and get it out of the damned committee over there.

We should make sure we have a process that would allow ordinary backbench members of parliament to feel that their ideas have a fair and equitable opportunity to come forward, even it means that I will come forward during the first hour to make my little speech. I will stand here and take questions and answers from my colleagues before any other debate, and we will have a quick vote on whether members want to proceed any further with it. Then it becomes the decision of this place, not of a committee.

Mr. Peter MacKay: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate very much the question and the opportunity to respond. I fully agree that first and foremost it sends the wrong signal that it is again the House leaders who are meeting in private to perhaps have these deliberations and discussions.

As a precursor to that, we are getting an opportunity to hear from all members. I appreciate what he said about the importance of private members' business. I fully agree that private members' hour should also be subject to questions and comments. If we have to expand that time to two hours, we should make greater use of unanimous consent to do so on occasion. We should make greater use of the opportunity, when a member comes forward with an idea, to engage other members to find out, as he has said, if the idea should go further.

• (1830)

Surely if a person has the inner fortitude, and has taken the time to draft a bill or motion and put it forward for selection and

deliberation, they should be able to stand on their hind legs and defend it. I have no difficulty with that suggestion whatsoever.

I hope the matter of private members' bills will be an area of deliberation in the committee that will get a very broad shrift and thorough examination as to how we can improve it, how we can engage more members and how we can bring more subject matter forward. I disagree that there should be any delineation of property over good ideas. If we can expand the ability of members to put ideas forward then we should do everything in our power to do so.

Mr. Myron Thompson (Wild Rose, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, in 1993 the government of the day was the hon. member's party. About six months, give or take, before the election the Conservative government made the decision to open the borders to barley sales and to have an open continental barley market. It was an excellent decision. Farmers benefited like they had never benefited before. Profits were good and everyone was happy. The wheat board even had record sales because it had decided there was competition going on and that it had better get off its duff and get to work. It was a great decision.

Not long after the election, the market was closed. I asked the leader of the hon. member's party if he could remember and relate to me why the policy was discontinued. What do we need to do to keep good things going for Canadians? Why was the mechanism so easy to shut down and why, seven or eight years later, am I still not able to find out why? Why was it shut down? I do not know.

Mr. Peter MacKay: Mr. Speaker, I will not be able to respond off the cuff. I will certainly look into the matter and try to find an answer for the hon. member. He deserves an answer.

Often policy decisions are made by incoming governments. I am not saying that is what happened here, but we all know the position that was taken on the issue, for example, of free trade by the current government with respect to the efforts of the Mulroney administration to bring that policy forward.

Mr. Myron Thompson: But should we be able to provide answers?

Mr. Peter MacKay: Mr. Speaker, by all means, information should be available. I will undertake to find out what happened in that instance since it was the Progressive Conservative government of the day that put the policy in place. I will do my best to get back to the hon. member as quickly as possible.

The Deputy Speaker: Before resuming debate I will inform the House that all members now have 10 minutes maximum for their speeches, subject to a five minute question and comment period.

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Mr. Reg Alcock (Winnipeg South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, trying to fit my thoughts into 10 minutes will be a bit of a trick, so I hope members in the ensuing five minutes will help me clarify my thinking with some of their questions.

The House is everything that members in the debate today have said it is. It is an enormously important place in the life of the country and in the lives of Canadians. It is the place where citizens have a voice. It is the place where rights are decided and arbitrated. It is the place where power is balanced and mitigated. It is the place where authority is exercised on behalf of all Canadians.

I am quite excited about the debate and quite pleased we are headed down this road. Frankly, I like the device that has been chosen. I want to thank all House leaders for the vehicle they have created because I have a lot of respect for them. They have a lot of knowledge about this place and they are applying themselves to the task. I hope we will have opportunities for members to meet with the committee and to present ideas that are hard to fit into a 10 minute speech.

I will step back a bit from the specifics of some of the rule changes that have been discussed today. I will try to position the debate in a somewhat different context.

A friend recommended I spend time preparing for the debate by reading the annotated rules of the House. They are a fascinating read. Rules are normally not terribly interesting to read.

● (1835)

When the rules that govern this Chamber were first created in 1867 and they were trying to figure out how they worked, they brought in a clause that existed for a long time which said that if they did not have a rule to cover something then the rules of the mother of parliaments would apply.

As we read this we also see the evolution of our society. The Chamber is a reflection of what we are as Canadians. The rules were written before my province, Manitoba, existed as a province and had representation in the House, and before Alberta and Saskatchewan were formally provinces. The rules existed before the advent of the automobile, the airplane or the telephone, and certainly before the fax machine and the Internet.

Each time changes in the external community put pressure on this place and made changes to the environment that the citizens we represent live in, the House had to adapt. It has adapted, and tracing that adaptation is an interesting read.

The question I raise today, though, is whether we are at a point in time on which we will look back in 20 or 30 years and say it was a far more revolutionary period than perhaps we ever realized.

Canadians have some advantages. Some of the foundational research on communications, communication theory and commu-

nication policy has come out of the work of Canadians. One of my favourites was an economist by the name of Harold A. Innis who, during the last century, started writing about the economy of the country and was drawn into the question of the power of communication.

Innis wrote a book called *The Bias of Communication*. He delivered a lecture in 1947 to the Royal Society of Canada regarding his research. He started the lecture by saying:

I have attempted to suggest that western civilization has been profoundly influenced by communication and that marked changes in communications have had important implications.

What Harold Innis was saying, if I can translate it to the year 2001, is that the Internet changes everything. His research dated to the early days of clay and cuneiform and traced how, as successive civilizations acquired the ability to assemble information and extract knowledge from it, the ruling classes were able to monopolize the information. Then a new technology would come along and disturb the system and a new power structure or a new elite would emerge.

Historically these things have happened in dramatic fashion through wars and revolutions, but also in other ways. The rise of the modern democracy was built largely around the printing press and the availability of information, which has enabled people to develop the intellectual tools and knowledge necessary to participate in the management of their country.

When we were concerned in the 1970s about dictatorships in Central and South America, there was a fellow who said to send them books instead of guns because an educated populace demands a democratic solution.

Why are we here today feeling that this instrument of democracy no longer functions, when Canada has an educated populace? Canadians are literate, well read and engaged with their government. Why are we concerned about a loss of credibility of this place?

I will give another reference, an American reference. It is from a fellow by the name of Jerry Mechling who said the same concern is being raised in democracies around the world. It is not just a Canadian problem. The issue arises throughout the industrialized world where democracies exist. By the way, Jerry Mechling will be speaking in Ottawa next Wednesday night. Here is how he begins one of his pieces on the changes brought about by communications:

We are entering a period of historical change comparable to the one that inspired Hamilton, Madison and Jay to pen *The Federalist Papers* in the late 1780s. Their task was to define a constitutional vision for a new kind of political community: a federal democratic republic. The challenge for leaders today is to define an economic, social and political vision for a new kind of society, a knowledge based society, and leadership will be crucial.

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• (1840)

I have thought about that a lot. I certainly support a lot of the suggestions people have made here about the changes that could be made to the rules to shift the power balance between the executive and the House. I agree with the leader of the Conservative Party when he says that when parliament works well government works well. Accountability is an important part of the functioning of any good organization.

I also agree with the analysis that says authority has over time moved to the executive. However I will put that in context. There is a tendency here to personalize that, to say it was something the current Prime Minister or the past Prime Minister did, or that it was part of some invidious plan on the part of somebody. I do not believe that is true at all.

I offer this analysis. The pace of change in society has been accelerating throughout the lifetime of mankind but never as rapidly as in the last few decades. Bill Gates, in his recent book, talks about this decade as the decade of velocity. The most important challenge in our society is trying to manage the rate of change and deal with the incredible decisions placed upon us not just as a government but as a society.

If we look at what has happened with large organizations, many large companies that were in existence a decade or two ago no longer exist today. A number of the largest companies in the world today did not exist in 1980. The rate of change is enormous. One response to the incredible velocity in the external community has been for governments to remove decision-making from the floor of the House. They have done so not for malicious reasons but to facilitate decisions and serve citizens because this place moves too slowly.

When I was director of child welfare in Manitoba, we wrote clauses enabling regulation because it was the most efficient way to get changes to reflect the changing needs of our citizens. I am not saying it was the best solution, but it was the only solution available. The shift in power from the House to the executive has been, in most cases, an attempt to meet the challenge imposed by those whom we serve.

The challenge is not to simply revert to an earlier stage. It is to figure out how this place can reform so that it moves in pace with the rest of society. In achieving this reform, therefore, the critical issues are those of electronic services, of getting information out earlier and of more efficiently and effectively interacting with the community we serve.

The rule changes being debated here are also important and they are like the rule changes we find in the annotated history. They need to be done. The process is a competent one and I am delighted

that it runs by consensus. However the bigger change, the one we must all get our minds around, is how to make this place work at the same speed at which our citizens move. How do we make this place respond to the pace of life in the communities we represent?

Mr. Dennis Mills (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, just a short congratulations to you on your appointment to chair the committee. In time, when you look back on your political legacy, your chairing of this committee has the potential to be a defining moment for you.

I wish we could have another hour of the member for Winnipeg South here tonight because he has spent thousands of hours working on the linkage of electronic government, which is where we as a service agency touch the general public. It is critical in this parliamentary reform that the service to the public, the linkage of what we do here, is transmitted to the people on the street, our constituents, from coast to coast. Right now they ask us as MPs to do things. It seems we never give them the answers they want, or that we give them the answers six weeks, two months or a year later.

I have a question for the member for Winnipeg South, who has touched on a critical issue here, electronic government. How does he envisage electronic government enhancing service to the public? That ultimately is what parliamentary reform is all about, and what ultimately will earn respect for the service we are supposed to provide in the House.

• (1845)

Mr. Reg Alcock: Mr. Speaker, if I could have leave to have the rest of the week we could really get into this.

The problem with the very important question the member has asked, and one which I thank him for, is that we get caught up in the tools: the electronics, the fancy colours and the fancy websites. However, the tools are not the issue. The tools are important to get information.

One of the things this does really well is it acts as a huge values clarification exercise for the nation where I, as a westerner dealing with the economy and interests of Winnipeg, have to confront the issue of bilingualism, which is not something that is driven as hard in my community as it is here, or the cod fishery. Together we come and forge through the exercises that go on in this incredibly wonderful country called Canada. We are really skilful at that.

How do we maintain that but get this beast moving at the same pace as the community it has to serve? The community goes around it because it cannot respond fast enough. That is why we have lost authority and our debates have become trivial. They have become liar-liar kind of debates. What does that do for anybody?

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The debates need to be substantive and real debates about the conditions that are affecting the people in our communities. We are not there because they pass us by all the time. I will try to give a more detailed answer in a presentation to the committee, which I will be allowed to do.

Mr. Grant McNally (Dewdney—Alouette, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to participate in the debate on parliamentary reform.

As members of the Alliance, and previously as members of the Reform Party, parliamentary reform is something for which we have become known. We are glad to see that we are having a debate in the House this evening on such an important topic. It is of course something that has been near and dear to our hearts for a very long time.

We hope that the debate and the committee that has been struck thinks big and has the vision and courage to move ahead in the face of those who would argue to maintain the status quo. We must move forward together because where we will end up will be a better place than from where we started.

In any debate that we have, in any consideration of moving forward on any topic, we need to have a clear understanding of why we need to move forward.

In terms of parliamentary reform, the public, those to whom we are responsible and accountable, are telling us that they want to see change in this place. It is incumbent upon us as leaders of this nation to move forward and to show, with our actions, that we are willing to listen and that we are willing to do more than simply have a debate one day in parliament and then move ahead as though nothing had happened. I am encouraged by this committee and this opportunity to explore these very important issues because the time is right to move forward.

It is interesting that one of the only constants that we will experience in our lives is change. What is now will never be again and we will be moving continually forward.

Generally speaking, there seems to be two attitudes that people have toward change. The first one, which is the more natural inclination, is to resist change because change takes us down a new path to somewhere where we are perhaps a little uncertain as to where we will arrive. It is understandable that some people and, I would argue, many people are resistant to change.

We could have a vision of where we are going. We could bring people along to understand that there is a compelling reason to move forward to a new destination, to a better place. We could take into consideration people's honest concerns about making those changes. We could have a clear airing of being able to present ideas that are holding others back from wanting to go forward with change. I think we could do those things.

• (1850)

We could go down that road and end up in a better place. Unfortunately there will be no rest for those who are involved in change, because once we get to the better place there will be others who will suggest further change.

Change is constant. We must grapple with that concept and understand that when we are talking about parliamentary reform the initiatives that we may move forward on will not be the end of the ball game. In many ways they will just be the beginning.

We certainly need to go down that road. We certainly need to work together in the House in ways we are sometimes unaccustomed to working. We need to work with members of all parties. We need to work together as government and opposition members to achieve some goals and a vision of ending up in a better place. It is not for ourselves but for this institution and for those who will come after us to govern.

We will have our names on a plaque in the basement of this hall one day. Apart from our families and personal acquaintances, very few might ever remember that we were honoured to grace these halls. However we will remember and cherish the moments we had to make a difference in Canada. It is incumbent upon us to make the most of this opportunity, to do what we can for this place here and now, so that those who come behind us in the future will carry that torch for us with that notion of change.

This place cannot be a static environment. The House cannot be a place where the rules are cast in stone. It cannot be a place where the ideas and innovations of those who lead this nation are unable to make it to the forefront. It has to be a place where all those ideas and issues are brought to bear. This is the place where we have been sent to do the nation's business for the period of time we are honoured to serve here.

That is why I am encouraged by this opportunity. It is a great honour to serve here. We need to give hope to our citizens that those who are leading are also listening and acting on the will of our citizens.

If we take these actions it will provide an opportunity to send a signal or message to the 40% or so of our citizens who chose not to vote in the last election. Many individuals who did not vote in the last election have said that the government and members of parliament are not listening, that it did not matter who was sent here, that nothing would change. We need to signal to our citizens that we are willing to change.

Many proposals have been put forward by members in the House today. I appreciate what they have had to say. I would not agree with all the suggestions and it is good to have the debate.

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I pay tribute to my colleague from Calgary Southwest who announced today that he would be leaving public life and returning to the private sector. He has been a leader on these issues for many years: before he got to the House and as he served in the House and will continue to serve until the end of this year.

His vision was one that we are now grappling with in the House. One of the things he brought forward was the issue of free votes in the House of Commons. There is no reason we cannot move forward on that initiative without any legislative change or any change to the standing orders. We could do it simply by allowing members to vote the wishes of their constituents.

Government members could support an opposition motion or a bill and opposition members could support a government bill or motion. We could work together on areas where there is commonality. We could bridge that gap, the partisan divide that seems to be very much a part of this place. We will never erase that totally, but there are many opportunities for us to work together for change, and free votes is one of them.

• (1855)

I was encouraged by the Minister for International Trade the other day. It was a small item but it was a gesture of good will. When we had a debate on softwood lumber in this place last week, the minister consented to stay beyond the regular time for questions. In fact that was initiated, Mr. Speaker, by your asking the House if there would be consent for such an item, and there was.

The minister stayed and he answered questions from opposition members for perhaps another 10 minutes. Although that was such a small item it sent a message of good will to members of the opposition that there was a minister who was willing to entertain questions. It was a very small change, but let us imagine if we were to incorporate that as a rule change or something we would do on a regular basis. That would help to break down the walls of partisanship. It would build a deposit of political capital for ministers of the government. It would be good for all members of the House.

With regard to private members' business, all bills should be votable. We could find ways to work around the current schedule to make that happen so that members could bring forward their items.

I know that my time is drawing short on this topic, so I will conclude by saying that I sincerely hope we spend time putting these changes into action. I hope we do not just have a debate, put it on the shelf and ignore what we have discussed here. We should move forward together in this place in a spirit of co-operation to make it a better place, not only for us but for future generations. Then we would have a responsive parliament which reflects the will and the wishes of those who have sent us here to govern.

Mr. John Bryden (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Aldershot, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the member opposite on his comments. I was particularly interested in his support for making private members' bills votable.

There is a technical problem to that. There are an awful lot of private members' bills that are always on the roster at any given time and there is a whole problem with respect to how they should be selected by lottery or whatever.

I would like to make a suggestion to him for his comment that was raised by the member for London North Centre. That was the possibility of every member of parliament during a session, from the time of an election to the next time the writ is dropped, being entitled to have one bill made votable. The actual lottery or the selection of the bill would be based simply on the order that the members' bills would come up. Every member would have at least one bill during a session that was votable. I wonder what the member thinks of that idea.

Mr. Grant McNally: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. I think it is a good idea. Certainly we would be in agreement that all items should be made votable. We would have to make some changes to the way we do business in private members' business in terms of the scheduling of those items. Perhaps we need to consider the idea of every member having a votable item.

I would support that notion or any other ideas members may have to involve more members and to focus on the main part of the member's request that all items be made votable. That is a very important thing that we need to do.

Ms. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate you this evening as the chair of the special committee on the modernization of House of Commons procedure. There is no one better for the challenge of trying to obtain consensus. For us to move forward, it was interesting to hear that not only the government would have a veto on this committee. Everyone on the committee would have a veto, so I hope there will be lots of opportunity for compromise, change and getting good ideas through.

In every organization there must be ongoing efforts to make things better. In the private sector it is called CQI, continuous quality improvement, or TQM, total quality management. In government it is called parliamentary reform, a phrase that seems to mean something different to everyone.

• (1900)

We need to make sure that people understand this is not about a revolution from the backbench MPs. It should actually be an

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ongoing process by which we discover the optimal practices of the 301 citizens who come to Ottawa to try to best represent the 30 million citizens. It is about ensuring the public good by identifying the obstacles and sharing the solutions. Today's special committee is an extraordinarily important step.

One of my heroes, Ursula Franklin, talked about good government as being fair, transparent and taking people seriously. It has been worrying to a lot of us over the past several months that somehow the public has become disengaged. If one went to Israel and saw six million politicians discussing what happened yesterday in the Knesset, it would be understood why we here worried on a daily basis about the cynicism and apathy of Canadians. We have to always look at what we can do. Each of us has a responsibility to hand on democracy at least as thick as we received it, if not a tiny bit thicker.

People feel Canadian democracy needs some reintegration. The most obvious symptom of the need for reform was the steep fall in the election turnout on November 27. After drifting down an average of 2.7% per election, turnout dropped more than 5% for the 2000 election. This confirmed years of academic admonitions, politician's anecdotes and pollsters findings that Canadians were indeed disengaging.

In 1984 the national average was a 75.3% turnout in a federal election of which we were always very proud. Last year it was 61.18%, and even lower in Ontario. It means that we have to see what we can do.

Today's special committee is an important first step. The idea that we can move forward by consensus is of huge importance to us collaborating on this important challenge.

It is clear that rules are not enough. Changing only the rules of parliament will not change what happens here. As Robert Marleau said to the rookie school of the new members of parliament, we can change all the rules we want but it is the culture of the place that really matters.

I wear four different hats in trying to make a difference and in trying to make sure that things change. The first is in the House and in committees. The second is within our caucus, in trying to make sure that the culture is one that is respectful of the kinds of changes that people want to make. The third is in my riding. The fourth is within the Liberal Party of Canada. We need to work on all four fronts if we are going to have the desired effect that Canadians again begin to engage.

It is extraordinarily important that the caucus has evolved a parallel process in which we can also look at all the things that have been done and the telephone books full of papers that have been written on the topic of parliamentary reform. We should start to look not at reinventing the wheel but going forward with Canadians at our side.

As a caucus we need to be able to look at the party options, the role of parliament, the role of parliamentarians, as well as what this very important committee will do in terms of how the House of Commons operates, its procedures, standing orders, question period and all of those things. Private members' business has been discussed and will be an important part of the deliberations of this committee.

It is also extraordinarily important that we look, as the member from Winnipeg South said, at the role of technology and make sure that if we are indeed modernizing parliament that we do it with all the citizens as engaged as possible, both at committees and with members in their offices.

It has a huge ability to create the new kind of deliberative democracy that I think we are looking for. I was heartened to hear the minister of Indian affairs, who came to women's caucus today, talk about his amazing project in terms of his technological ability to be in contact with the bands and the schools in order to do his job.

● (1905)

We know we have to have a look at standing committees. There are ones that are working extraordinarily well in a very non-partisan way and with its eye on the goal. Others have been rendered dysfunctional. We need to figure out why that is. It is important that we look at standing committees. It is important that they deal with horizontal issues across parliament. Chapter 20 of the auditor general's report said how difficult that was. We look at having the standing committees can help us with that.

I as chair and members of the subcommittee on disabilities were thrilled that the auditor general thought our committee, which looked at the issue of disabilities across all ministries, had been helpful in that management.

When we look at caucus committees and their culture, it is important for us to look at, like the English and French parliamentarians, the purpose for us being here is not to try to get into cabinet. That culture of careerism has to stop. There are important things that people can do. Look at some of the ministers in other countries who actually give up their administrative roles in order to be able to do an important project. It is a culture problem. We need to make sure that people are not paralyzed by some fantasy of a role at cabinet.

It is really important that we look at the accountability of government. This is not just about what money we spend, but whether we get good value for it. With the chairman of the public accounts committee, I was thrilled to chair these round tables on societal indicators. We discussed how we could use the estimate process in a better way to make sure we were funding programs that worked and ones which would ensure we had safer streets, healthier populations and cleaner air. We also discussed how we

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could measure that and use that to build back the credibility of Canadians so they would know we were spending their money wisely. There are extraordinarily interesting things that can happen in terms of the accountability of our government and building back the faith.

It is also important that there be good supports. Above all things, the most interesting to me in parliamentary reform is the relationship we need to build with the citizens of Canada so they see this institution as relevant.

St. Paul's is an amazing riding. Forty per cent of the people have a university education. We have an amazing ability to engage. However, one thing I adored doing over this last month or so was taking the problem of cynicism and apathy of Canadians to the students of grade 10 in all the ridings. This was related to the citizenship engagement award. I asked them what they thought the problem was in terms of cynicism and apathy and what they thought we in the government could do differently to help them. I did this understanding that their knowledge of the technology was much better than mine and that maybe they could find us some web based solutions on which we could move forward.

It is clear that in all of the Ekos polling, Canadians believed that if we as parliamentarians could take the national problems to the people at the grassroots, we would solve most of our big national problems. We must figure out a better way of doing that. It was quite clear that Canadians felt the media, senior business leaders, lobbyists and interest groups had too much power. The Ekos poll noted that Canadians felt that parliamentarians had little power and that the average citizen had way too little power.

The challenge of democracy between elections is what we need to see. We need to see that it is not just about going to the polls. If we are not engaging citizens between elections they stop going to the polls.

[Translation]

In conclusion, the people of Canada have an enormous contribution to make in the development of public policy. We must try to involve them in a grassroots movement for democratic reform, which will produce lasting results.

• (1910)

[English]

Mr. John Bryden (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Aldershot, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her excellent dissertation. I wonder if she could comment a little further on the political culture, that is the context in which we seek parliamentary reform, the relationship between the backbench on the government

side, for example, and the sometimes lack of opportunity of expression because they are government backbenchers.

Ms. Carolyn Bennett: Mr. Speaker, some of what the hon. member is talking about is actually perception. I was thrilled at the last election to write single spaced on one page what I thought I had been able to do here.

The committees I had the privilege to sit on, whether it was the national health products committee, the committee on custody and access or the finance committee, was one of the best abilities for the government to go out to real Canadians and harvest good ideas. It was been extremely satisfying. We got to push the issues we wanted. It was like any board that one might sit on.

In caucus we fight for the things we really care about. We do not win all the battles but we go out as a united front. It was the same as any other board I sat on.

There is so much to do around here. There are so many issues that require real champions. It is quite clear that when the stakeholders and the citizens of Canada who must work in concert with us as politicians to sometimes work through a bureaucracy that has too much on its plate, we get to shine the light and move those things through.

I am hugely optimistic. I think the frustration is real, but there are serious ways that we can make a difference here.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Verchères—Les-Patriotes, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to take part in this debate pursuant to Standing Order 51(1). Its purpose is to ensure that we are able to debate in this House any matter relating to the reform of the standing orders, consolidate the achievements that we deem appropriate and make the changes we feel it would be advisable to make so that this House can be a modern parliamentary institution and meet the expectations of our fellow citizens.

In that regard, I would say that we are becoming increasingly aware of a certain cynicism among the public, a loss of confidence in political institutions and, more generally, in the men and women chosen to sit in this very House.

Consequently, it is certainly appropriate for us to give ourselves a kind of shock treatment to jolt our political institutions more into line with the expectations of our fellow citizens.

Let us recall that, on April 21, 1998, a similar debate was held in this House under the same Standing Order 51(1). Unfortunately, it did not result in any changes to the standing orders. This time I trust the debate will not be in vain, that it will not be pointless and that we will be able to see a sensible outcome leading to substantial

amendments to the standing orders such that they will, as I have said, be brought more into line with the expectations of the people of Canada and of Quebec about what a representative political institution should be.

Unfortunately, we have not used the standing orders to make the changes to the electoral and parliamentary system we ought to have made. It is to be hoped that the process put in place through this committee will produce some results. I hope that this committee will show the necessary transparency to enable us to achieve results fulfilling not only the expectations of our fellow citizens but also the wishes expressed here in this House.

I will just go quickly through my shopping list, in the light of comments I have heard from both sides of the House as an ordinary member. In my role as party whip, I have also had the opportunity to hear my colleagues defend various points of view, and those of our constituents, the people we have the duty and honour of representing here in the House.

● (1915)

First, with respect to committee chairs, if we want to ensure that committees can operate in as non-partisan a manner as possible, with the maximum consensus, something must be done to eliminate to the greatest extent possible partisan comments within committees.

Obviously, I would first recommend that there be a better distribution of chairs and vice chairs between the opposition and the government, and that it not be exclusively government members who are assigned as committee chairs.

There are many examples of committees that operate this way, including in the national assembly in Quebec City and in the house of commons in London, and all signs are that this approach is very useful, very productive and very positive.

Ultimately, the current standing orders notwithstanding, the Speaker of the House will have to be able to intervene when a serious problem arises in committee. Unfortunately, when decisions taken in committee run counter to the standing orders, common sense and the very interest of democracy, members need to have a court of last appeal.

In the circumstances, I believe that the Speaker of the House would be ideal for this purpose, because he is elected by all members of the House. He could therefore not be accused of any favouritism. He should therefore be an impartial judge, who could, as need be, produce a final ruling that is both equitable and just.

I think the public expects members of the House of Commons to be able to vote more often according to the interests of their riding and according to their conscience rather than along party lines. Too often, the public has the impression that their members have become more instruments of their political party than representatives of their riding in the House of Commons, in parliament.

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Members will have to be allowed more flexibility, so that they can vote freely not only on moral issues, but also on a host of government management issues. To do so, the notion of confidence must be redefined. Every time we vote, the government must not necessarily feel that a vote of confidence is being held.

Apart from budget issues, perhaps we could create a mechanism whereby, if the government were defeated in the House, the very next day it could put a motion to the House to find out whether it still enjoys its confidence. In such a case, the government would not fall automatically when it is defeated on a particular measure. It would simply be required to ask the House whether it still enjoys its confidence.

We have seen a harmful and unfortunate tendency in recent years, which the government follows increasingly frequently, that of imposing closure and time allocation motions. A mechanism has to be set to require the government to justify and explain its reasons for the measure, which should be exceptional.

The standing orders provide for this. Indeed, Standing Order 78 provides that it must be as a last resort. Just as the standing orders refer to the concept of abuse of parliamentary practice, perhaps we could, as we did with Motion No. 2, allow the Speaker to rule whether House practices are being abused.

If the Speaker is considered able to rule on the repetitive, frivolous or vexatious nature of amendments introduced by members, I think it should also be provided that the Speaker may rule on the vexatious nature of the government's excessive use of time allocation and closure motions.

● (1920)

To avoid the very unpleasant and embarrassing situation in which we found ourselves during the last parliament at third reading of Bill C-20, on reform of the Elections Act, we should allow at least one representative from each recognized political party in this House to speak at each stage of the review of a bill or during each debate.

We must not find ourselves in the same situation as the one we experienced during third reading of Bill C-20, to amend the Elections Act, when only two of the five political parties in the House were allowed to express their views through their spokespersons.

It would be appropriate, I believe, to allow all political parties to express their views at least once on any issue brought to the attention of the House.

In my opinion, all the issues brought to the attention of parliamentarians should be votable items. I am referring to private members' business, to emergency debates and to take note debates. Of course we will have to devise a new process to select the bills that will be reviewed by the House. However, once the House looks at a bill or a motion, particularly a bill or a motion proposed

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by parliamentarians, it would be more than appropriate for members to vote on them.

We must design a process whereby the House would be asked to formally ratify international treaties signed by the Government of Canada, as is done in most democracies. Canada is an exception to the rule and not necessarily a good one. Under the current system, the government does not have to ask parliament to ratify the treaties it signs. This is an anachronism that should be corrected.

It is also important to change the parliamentary calendar. The government House leader likes to pick and choose when deciding which Westminster rules are important or relevant for the House of Commons in Canada. There are a number of practices in London that do not necessarily suit his needs, so he does not talk about them.

The parliamentary calendar was modified in London some years ago. They took a number of factors into consideration and lightened the calendar. Doing so would not mean that we would sit any fewer hours; they would just be distributed differently. Friday sittings would not necessarily be abolished, but they would be changed. We could, for example, look at private members' business on Fridays. We could, as they do in London and in Quebec City, have an inquiry mechanism which would require us to go into a specific matter in greater depth with the minister responsible.

It is important to realize that, with the exception of Ontario, all ridings represented by the members of this House are larger than their counterparts in the provincial legislative assemblies and in the national assembly. They are, therefore, ridings with far larger populations. The fact is that the members of the House of Commons sit far longer, and far more often, than their counterparts in the various provinces and in Quebec. As a result, we have far less time to cover our far larger ridings and to serve our far greater numbers of constituents.

I think we ought to address this reality, particularly since we need to take increasingly into consideration the expectations of our fellow citizens in this respect, as well as the fact that members of parliament have families. We need to be able to reconcile politics and a family life, particularly if we want to attract more women to politics.

There are therefore grounds for reassessing the parliamentary calendar, reworking things so that all members, or at least most of them, can spend at least one day a week in their riding, not including weekends of course, to do the work of their riding office and look after the needs of their fellow citizens.

• (1925)

Over the years, as a result of custom, of the various Speakers' rulings, and of the work done in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and in similar committees in previous

parliaments, we have seen an erosion, as it were, of parliamentary privilege.

It would perhaps be appropriate to reinforce the notion of parliamentary privilege such that it can be effectively applied. There has, of course, been an extension of privilege in committee work, but there has been a erosion of privilege per se, and this needs to be revisited.

Thought needs to be given to making the prescribed form for the presentation of petitions more flexible. This poses a serious problem with our constituents, who are not necessarily up on all the parliamentary jargon and who may spontaneously circulate a petition on a matter of public interest and submit it to their member, only to be told that it is not in the prescribed form and cannot be presented in the House.

This goes against the very principle whereby citizens should be able to submit petitions to the Parliament of Canada. Something must therefore be done to make this prescribed form naturally accessible to citizens.

In order to avoid embarrassing situations such as those we saw prior to 1994 and those we have seen in recent years, the rules must be changed to make opposition motions non-amendable, if I may put it that way.

Something has to be done so that committee work may be televised much more easily, in keeping naturally with the guidelines set by the House Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. You will recall, Mr. Speaker, since you were on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs at the time, that these guidelines concern the rules established for broadcasting the debates of this House.

The rules for allowing emergency debates must also be made more flexible. Very often we have different experiences in the various regions of Canada and Quebec, which we would like to draw to the attention of the Chair. It may, for a variety of perfectly legitimate reasons, not recognize the importance of issues raised by members. Accordingly, it would be important for us to be able to ease the rules on emergency debates, especially since they do not impinge on regular hours set aside for the business of the House.

As they do not affect the business of the House, the government's legislative agenda, private members' business or the regular operations of the House, I argue in favour of an easing of the rules on the acceptance of emergency debates, so that this House may respond in a timely way to the various situations that may arise in the regions of Canada and Quebec. As members can see, the subject is vast and many changes may be made.

I note with considerable satisfaction, I must say, and with great pleasure that the government House leader is still with us this

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evening to listen to what we have to say. I hope he will not merely listen, but that he will also follow up on the comments made by his colleagues here today, so that we can, as I said at the beginning, amend the standing orders to allow our fellow citizens to identify with our parliamentary system.

For the benefit of the government House leader but, as I mentioned at the very beginning of my speech, we cannot take this issue casually. In view of voter turnout at the last election, we must recognize that our fellow citizens are losing interest in public affairs.

• (1930)

This compels us to question the electoral process as well as the political and parliamentary institutions. We must modernize our institution so that our fellow citizens can identify with it. These reforms must be such that Canadians feel that we members of parliament are not mere instruments of political parties or voting machines, but are here to represent them, to protect their interests and to voice their concerns.

[English]

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have two brief comments before I ask my question. First, dealing with the democratic process within the House and committees is an important effort parliamentarians are making. After a short time here—one term and now into my second—I will say that it has been a very frustrating process. Those members who have gone on year after year dealing within this process are to be congratulated and should all be nominated for the Order of Canada just for surviving what has sometimes been so frustrating that we wonder why we come to the House each day. I want to congratulate all those who have worked so hard to have this issue brought to the forefront. Hopefully in a non-partisan manner we will all continue to work to make this a more democratic House.

Second, I would like to tell the member from the Bloc that I was very disappointed with his comment that women need to spend time on family matters. A number of women are already being criticized for becoming actively involved in the political process because they neglect their families. I know that men as well as women want family time and want to be very much a part of it. I had to get that comment in because I do not want women feeling that they are neglecting their families in any way, shape or form by becoming involved in the political process.

Often what happens in a country where there is a lack of democracy in parliament is that there is also a lack of democracy within the country. I wonder how my hon. colleague from Quebec feels. Does he see the people of Quebec and Canada as feeling very much part of a very undemocratic country today?

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Speaker, in connection with the comment by my colleague, I would like to make sure she understood my point of view clearly.

I was not referring specifically to women when I spoke of family life. What I was saying was that, if we want to get more people interested in public life, more women in particular, interested in public life, or a career in politics, perhaps we should make it possible for a life in politics to leave more room for family life.

I do not wish to imply in any way that we are neglecting our families, but perhaps a more sustained physical presence in our ridings might enable us to better meet the expectations of our fellow citizens as far as serving the public is concerned. Perhaps in some cases changes to the calendar might also make it possible for us, and the men and women who will make up this House in future, to better meet the expectations of our family members. I do not know if this reply responds better to the concerns of my colleague.

As for the sense of being part of a democratic society in connection with what goes on here, that of course is not even addressed by this debate. Since she has asked, however, I would tell my hon. colleague that a number of my fellow citizens view with some perplexity the fact that this parliament is composed of two chambers: one elected, with all the difficulties, constraints and vicissitudes that surround election to this House and to its operations, and the second appointed, made up of unelected individuals who are, to all intents and purposes, chosen by the government of the day.

For a so-called modern democracy like Canada, whose electoral legislation most certainly could do with some modernization and whose parliament contains one chamber composed of people who are not elected, there is indeed a rather common perception that Canada's democratic institutions may be a bit out of date and perhaps need some of the cobwebs dusted off.

Perhaps the entire matter of parliamentary reform numbers among the concerns of a large part of the population about our public and political institutions.

• (1935)

[English]

Mr. John Bryden (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Aldershot, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the debate not to argue for more opportunities for backbench MPs, but to plead with you specifically, Mr. Speaker, to help us retain as backbenchers the little opportunity that we still have.

Mr. Speaker, I was alarmed today when I sat in this House and I heard your statement pertaining to Motion No. 2 that was passed in the House on February 27. Motion No. 2 referred to the streamlin-

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ing of report stage, because it was perceived by all sides of the House that report stage was sometimes utilized in an abusive manner, and Motion No. 2, which was passed by the House, was designed to correct this problem.

I will read Motion No. 2 says:

—the Speaker will not select for debate a motion or series of motions of a repetitive, frivolous or vexatious nature or of a nature that would serve merely to prolong unnecessarily proceedings at the report stage and, in exercising this power of selection, the Speaker shall be guided by the practice followed in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Speaker, today in replying—in making your statement to that motion that was passed, as I say, already by the House—you said,

I intend to apply these four criteria to all amendments at report stage, no matter which side of the House they come from.

And by that, Mr. Speaker, we understood you to mean that you would not select those amendments for report stage that were repetitive, frivolous, abusive or would unusually prolong debate in the House. But then, Mr. Speaker, you went on. You said:

I also intend to apply those criteria in the original note whose validity has been endorsed by the adoption of government Motion No. 2. Specifically, motions in amendment that could have been presented in committee will not be selected.

Let me just repeat that: “Specifically, motions in amendment that could have been presented in committee will not be selected” by you.

In supporting Motion No. 2 I never felt that I was supporting that proposition because, if I understand that proposition broadly, what it means is that any amendment that a member could have put in committee will not be selected by you. But, Mr. Speaker, that happens all the time. I am not at all committees. Sometimes I want to submit amendments at report stage and I am not a member of the committee. This would suggest that any report stage amendment that I submitted, if I could have put it in committee—and of course, as MPs we can always put an amendment in a committee—you would not select it.

Mr. Speaker, you go on and you seem to add to this proposition because what you say, you make a recommendation to MPs like myself, backbench MPs, and you say:

—I would strongly urge all members and all parties to avail themselves fully of the opportunity to propose amendments during committee stage so that the report stage can return to the purpose for which it was created, namely for the House to consider the committee report and the work the committee has done.

That is not my vision of report stage at all. Report stage, I always understood, existed to give members an opportunity who were not on committee, who had a differing opinion of what was going on in committee, our opportunity to propose an amendment in the House and to stimulate debate. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, in your own speech you make allusion to the 1968 special committee on procedure which said that it considered that report stage to be:

essential in order to provide all members of the House, and not merely members of the committee, with an opportunity to express their views on the bills under consideration—

While I can only believe, Mr. Speaker, that you will interpret, or I should interpret your words very narrowly because I can assure you on this side of the House, the government House leader and the leadership of my party assured we backbenchers that the Motion No. 2 would in no way restrict our opportunity to express ourselves at report stage, Mr. Speaker, and with good reason.

● (1940)

The reality, particularly as a government backbencher, is that in committee the government dominates. If we as backbench MPs want to move some kind of amendment that is not in keeping with what may be the government’s direction of things, then we are not given an opportunity to push our amendment forward.

I can give you a classic example. In 1995 I was on the lobbyist registration committee—or the committee of industry studying the lobbyist registration act—and I made it known to the whip that I was interested in supporting an amendment that was being proposed by my opposition colleagues on the committee.

What happened was that when it came to clause by clause, the whip withdrew my voting privileges on that committee and substituted someone else. So the only way under those circumstances for me to advance the amendment I believed in would have been to submit it as a report stage amendment.

Furthermore, sometimes one wishes as a backbench government MP to utilize report stage to submit one’s own amendment because one knows full well that the government will not support it. You know full well that the amendment will not pass. However, report stage gives a backbench MP an opportunity to present his thoughts, his concerns shall we say, before the entire House and before the entire nation.

The reality is that if we make a speech in front of committee, sadly even the Hansard of that committee is not available to the public until sometimes many weeks after the statement has been made, and indeed the media normally does not follow the debates in committee unless there is some incredibly important thing that is occurring which is of great media interest.

It becomes absolutely, dreadfully important to have this opportunity at report stage to draw the attention of the public to one’s deep concerns as a backbench MP to some aspect of legislation.

For example, in the citizenship bill last year I proposed at report stage an amendment to the oath of citizenship. The committee and the minister made it very clear that they were not prepared to entertain a change in the oath of citizenship as it was in the legislation. I had to use report stage to actually get what I deeply, deeply believed in before the public.

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I would like to believe, Mr. Speaker, that you are going to interpret the need to submit an amendment to committee very, very narrowly. I would assume that if you do want to give backbench MPs like myself as much opportunity for debate as possible, what you may choose to do is interpret what you said in your own words, perhaps interpret it as referring only to those members of committee.

If members of the committee do not propose amendments then perhaps there is a reasonable argument that they should not be allowed to then do it in report stage separately, but backbench MPs cannot be in more than one place at the same time.

I track the work of a number of committees and I can tell you for instance, Mr. Speaker, I have a possible report stage amendment for Bill C-9, the Canada Elections Act amendments, that I know the government will not like. If I put it in committee it will die instantly. If I put it in report stage then I put it for all the House to see and consider. I have not decided yet whether I want to do it but it is an essential privilege as a backbench MP. And if, in your interpretation of Motion No. 2, you deprive me of the opportunity to move report stage amendments as a backbench MP—if you confine me only to moving those amendments in committee—Mr. Speaker, you will have absolutely eroded the very essence of my role here as a backbench MP.

Quite frankly I do not know what I would do if that is the way you rule but, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to the next time we go to report stage. I will be looking closely at how you do select amendments for report stage. I hope, Mr. Speaker, you will remember my words that I said when I spoke to Motion No. 2. If I may read them, these were my concluding words before we passed the motion. I said, “But I end with one caution, because I remind you, Mr. Speaker, that whatever you do, you must protect the rights of the backbench MPs and the opposition MPs to have their say in debate on legislation at report stage”.

• (1945)

Mr. Speaker, it is not the government House leader. It is not an opposition leader. It is your responsibility to protect my opportunities and my rights as a backbench MP.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Carleton, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his quite alarming comments. We will soon find out whether his concerns will be realized.

Tomorrow I will be attending the committee dealing with Bill C-9 where I will be putting forward some amendments. Report stage will be next week and I will be watching, with as much interest as he, to see whether further proposed amendments can be brought forward at that time. I do hope that his concerns are unfounded, although I fear they are not.

What is the member's proposed or preferred method of dealing with report stage?. Would it simply be a return to the status quo ante, or would he make some other suggestion for change?

Mr. John Bryden: Mr. Speaker, what we understood we were agreeing to on this side, in order to support the government's Motion No. 2, was that the Speaker should put limitations on vexatious and frivolous amendments.

If the hon. member will recall, progress in the House was delayed because of hundreds of amendments of a frivolous nature pertaining to certain bills. That is fine, but unfortunately what seems to have happened, if I read Motion No. 2 correctly, it says that the Speaker will also be guided by practice in the British parliament.

Unfortunately, none of us know what is meant by being guided by practice in the British parliament. It would appear, from what the Speaker has said, and I cite it here, that he is making an allusion to Motion No. 2 and something that was endorsed by Motion No. 2, and I can only believe it was the guidelines that were cited in the original motion. He is using that, it would appear, to justify saying that only motions presented in committee will be selected.

I hope that is not the case because the reality around here is that we have to trust our leadership, on this side and on the member's side, in getting our support for legislation or a motion, that it will not introduce something into the wording of the legislation or the motion that it knows that we as backbench MPs will not have the opportunity or the expertise to check.

I make my appeal to the Speaker and tell him most emphatically that never did I understand, nor do I think the vast majority of the backbench MPs on the Liberal side understand, that the Speaker would confine amendments to be selected only to those that were proposed in committee. In other words, if we were to follow the Speaker's reasoning as we see it, what we would find is that the only committee amendments that would appear at report stage would be government amendments. If that is the case, then there would be no point in debate. The debate would have occurred at committee.

Never did I ever believe that what was proposed by Motion No. 2 would make it impossible for me to submit my amendments as a backbench MP to anything other than the committee. I need to have the right to submit my amendments at report stage in this House if I am not a member of the committee.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a very basic question to ask my hon. colleague. One of the problems the country has is when the government, the privy council or some other agency makes appointments to various boards.

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● (1950)

For example, the former member from Coquitlam is a member of the citizen immigration board. The former member for St. John's West is a member of the veterans appeals board, and the former member for Egmont is a member of the transportation safety board. All we are really asking, and these are good men, is whether they are the best people available for those positions.

Would the hon. member not agree that their *c.v.*'s and the details of their positions should be forwarded to the appropriate committee for further discussion to see if they are the most appropriate people for those sensitive positions?

Mr. John Bryden: Mr. Speaker, I can only confine my reply to the nature of my speech. I have to say that I have absolute faith in you and in the independence of your decisions. The House has absolute confidence in you, that you will exercise your heavy responsibilities with absolute impartiality and always look to the best interests of all the MPs because, as you are fond of saying, you are a servant of the House.

That is why I did get a little impassioned there. In fact, I have full confidence that you will interpret the power that Motion No. 2 has given you in a way in which the opportunities of backbench MPs to submit amendments at report stage will be preserved. In fact I do not expect you to follow literally the suggestion that motions in amendment that could have been presented in committee will not be selected. I am sure that you intend that to be exercised extremely narrowly. I have full confidence in you.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Carleton, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member who has just spoken for bringing a very serious matter to the attention of the House.

It will be a very interesting test when Bill C-9 comes before the House. The hon. government House leader is also the minister sponsoring Bill C-9. It will be the first bill back which will apply the recently adopted motion. We will see him occupying several roles I guess. We will watch with great interest to see how enthusiastic he is about allowing for a full range of debate in this place on potential amendments that were not brought forward in committee.

We will also be able to get a sense of the sincerity with which he is intending to apply the motion we are currently debating. To what degree is the motion sincere as opposed to the degree to which it is meant as window dressing, merely to divert attention from the ongoing erosion of democracy. That erosion is contained in Bill C-9 and the series of rather pernicious laws, of which it is merely the latest, designed to limit access of third parties during an election.

Bill C-9 is intended to restrict the ability of Canadians to participate fully in referendum campaigns, which can only be called at any rate at the behest of the government, and to limit the

ability in the case of this law of small parties to participate in election campaigns on an equal footing with those larger parties represented in the Chamber. I hope we will discover that the government House leader is very sincere. I fear we may find the opposite, but we will find out and we will be watching with great attention.

The last member to speak did so on a very narrow but important topic. It is my intention to draw from some of the same themes but to speak in a very broad sense. I will also dwell upon some of the broad themes of democracy that the motion addresses or hopes to address.

● (1955)

I am thinking here of the spirit that motivates the 1867 Constitution of Canada and the words found in its preamble. It begins "...with a Constitution similar in Principle to that of the United Kingdom—". The Constitution of Canada is a written constitution, whereas that of Britain is not. The Constitution of Canada is federal and Britain is a quasi-unitary state and was entirely unitary in 1867. There were no regional assemblies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The essence that was being captured in that preamble was the notion that Canada would be similar to the United Kingdom in having certain understandings as to how Canadians would be treated by their government. It was an idea conceptualized in the imperial parliament at that time in a law called the Colonial Laws Validity Act, which attempted to make clear limitations on what colonial assemblies, including Canada at the time, could do in terms of restricting the rights of their citizens.

Any law that was repugnant would be repugnant to the laws of England as applied in England and would also be invalid in a colonial legislature. That was used with limited success as an argument against racist laws in Australia that were meant to exclude non-whites from immigration from other parts of what was then the British Empire.

The preamble was also meant to make it clear that Canada would be adopting many of the conventions that existed in Britain. The most important of those conventions was the party system which at that time was starting to gel in Britain. The convention that the ministry was responsible to, its House of Commons, and this had already taken place to some degree in Canada in the form of responsible governments. We are being true to our own independently developed traditions which paralleled those which developed in Britain.

This empiricist tradition is at the base of our political system and is the basis of the great success of our democracy or, as I like to say and have said on other occasions in this place, of our republic. I mean republic in the traditional Aristotelian sense; a mixed government in which there is a monarchial element, an aristocratic

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element and a democratic element. This is the basis of the success of our system and I worry when I see it eroding.

An alternative system has been used widely in the west and has done a great deal of damage over the past two centuries. This is the tradition that developed through Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This is the concept of a general will which is expressed not through institutions such as this one, not through rules of order and not mediated at all, but a will which is expressed. It is different from the mass of individual wills. It is, in some respect, a common will felt by the people which is interpreted almost intuitively by a leader who is in mystical union with the people.

We saw this developed by Rousseau and saw it actualized in France in the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte and later on by Napoleon III. We have also seen it in action in other countries. In Argentina, it was known as Peronism. We saw it develop into a cult of personality in a number of countries like fascist Italy, Portugal and Spain.

The danger is that these institutions, which have been developed so carefully in Canada and in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and also which in a very different way were jelled and set down in constitutional stone in the United States following its revolution, will erode over time. The American founding fathers worried a great deal that the natural course of things is for power to centralize in the hands of a few or eventually of one ruler.

The tendency has been for power over time, in the absence of some sort of cataclysm which resets everything back at its republican origins, to centralize.

• (2000)

We see this developing in the United States, for example, in the so-called imperial presidency in which to some degree, to a minor degree but to a growing degree, we have seen effectively an elected monarch with a four year periodic election of that monarch. This is something we have seen drawn to the public attention at various times. The phrase “the imperial presidency” comes from the time of Richard Nixon.

In Canada we see the centralization of power in the Prime Minister’s Office and in the hands of the Prime Minister. We even see, to some degree, members of cabinet, except for those very central members of the inner cabinet, frozen out from power. We also see the House being turned into what amounts to an electoral college in perpetual session simply reaffirming the Prime Minister, who is in a very genuine sense simply our elected king, reaffirming him in office periodically through these forced votes.

This is something which absolutely must be fought against. Of course the first step in doing this is to try to create more democracy in the House. This is of course why I feel so strongly and why I do hope that the motion here is meant sincerely, that the committee

will come back with some very practical suggestions which will indeed return some autonomy to the House so that it serves as the democratic check on the monarchical power represented by the Prime Minister.

As well of course, we would like to see the Senate turned into an aristocracy as it was originally meant, that is to say a natural aristocracy, the best among us selected to represent the wisdom by which the decisions made here are mediated before they become the law of the land.

Very briefly, because I know I have just a few moments left, I want to draw the attention of the House to one possibility that I think the committee should consider as it meets to decide how it will change the way in which this place operates, and that is the secret ballot. The secret ballot, of course, is used here only for the election of the Speaker. I think all members are happy with that system. I think it works well.

I wonder if we could not broaden the system and use it as well for electing the Deputy Speaker, chairs of committees and also commissioners reporting to parliament, who are after all, at least nominally, to represent the will of parliament and to be responsible to us as opposed to the government.

I also wonder if we could not perhaps solve the problem of supreme court justices being non-representative if they were to be elected by secret ballot in parliament from perhaps a list nominated by the government or proposed by some other method.

Finally, I wonder if patronage appointments could not be ratified, perhaps in groupings, by means of secret ballot.

I would suggest that if we do this we consider using some means of voting that is a little more expeditious than the method used in the election of the Speaker, that is to say something that takes less than a day to execute. Perhaps electronic voting is appropriate. Perhaps a single transferable ballot is appropriate.

I simply present those options for your consideration, Mr. Speaker, and for the consideration of the House.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my previous question was completely forgotten or ignored by the Liberal backbencher, so I will ask it of my hon. colleague from the Alliance Party.

A lot of appointments are made to various boards and agencies throughout the country. We in our party are very concerned, as are most Canadians, that the right person is appointed for that particular position. In most cases we assume they are either friends of the Prime Minister or friends of the current government.

Would the member or his party support the idea that when people are appointed to boards such as the immigration board, the pension appeals board for veterans, and the transportation safety board, that

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at least their CVs are presented to the appropriate committee for review? Would the member also support the idea that, if possible, individuals be brought before committees to be asked questions about their experience and their knowledge of the particular board they are on?

At least that way, at least in my belief, Canadians would then know that the person appointed to that position is the best person available and not just necessarily a political appointment.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member raises a good point. I do not think that the exact method is necessarily the important thing. It is some form of review prior to, as opposed to after, appointments have been made, some form of questioning, that would be profitable. Committees are certainly a good place to start.

• (2005)

There is always a problem with these things when the votes take place openly because then we get, effectively, some kind of party discipline or pressure being applied to the decisions that are made and to the questions that come up. However, I am afraid this is probably all that is available to us and it is a good starting point.

I have struggled with the question of how we deal with patronage appointments, ensuring that they are in fact based on merit. Absent the presence of a philosopher king who always chooses exclusively on merit and who is virtually omniscient in being able to choose the best people, we need to have some form of delegation. I would think that the nominations going forward to whoever is doing the review ought to as well be coming from a bit broader source than merely the Prime Minister's Office.

I say this with some reservation, because there may be problems with this, but I think that perhaps we should consider the possibility of excluding certain classes of people from patronage appointments, such as people who are defeated candidates for a party in the prior election until a period of time has passed, or people who have perhaps donated more than a certain amount of money to a governing party, or people who have served in some other capacity that would make them obvious candidates, unless they go through some sort of special further review to ensure that they really are being chosen on their merits and that their political allegiance is purely coincidental.

Mr. Steve Mahoney (Mississauga West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to see that some of my supposed friends have arrived in this place.

I find it interesting. I suspect we are heading into an opportunity lost. I commend my House leader for attempting to put forward

some ideas and some recommended changes. I think they are good and they will make our lives as MPs and our ability to represent our constituents a little easier.

This will simply change the rules, but frankly I am sure that the types of changes that we are hearing opposite will not change the nature of this place. I hear people over there saying we do not live in a democracy. Democracy, or the lack thereof, should not be confused with acquiescence to one's ideas or to the ideas of one party or another. If the fact that we do not agree on something upsets someone over there, or even over here, it seems to me wrong, by its very nature, to stand up and say that is not democratic, to say that because people are going to do it their way because they were elected to do it that way and others cannot change their minds about it means they are not democrats. That in its very nature is just wrong-headed.

Frankly, the real true test of democracy in the country happens in the electoral system.

I hear the member opposite using an interesting phrase. He says this place is like an electoral college in perpetual session. I am sure people at home are watching this and asking what the heck he is talking about or asking what a lot of these people are talking about when they talk about change.

The real issue is, do we respect one another or do we even respect the role that we are expected to play as parliamentarians? Or do we simply want to use our partisan position to somehow denigrate the work of others in this place and therefore play into the hands of the naysayers and the people who would say that this place is not democratic? To paraphrase Winston Churchill, he basically said that this may not be the best system in the world but it is a long way ahead of whatever is in second place.

Does that mean we should not have change? Does that mean we should not perhaps change the way our committees operate? I heard my hon. colleague from this side of the House arguing in favour of having the ability to place amendments on the floor at report stage in this Chamber and not be restricted to committee. I think that is a good idea, again, as long as it is not abused.

• (2010)

We have seen members opposite put in place as many as 3,000 amendments. We have been through this debate. Changing a comma to a semicolon: is that democracy? Does that make any sense whatsoever? Is that the appropriate use of even the lighting that it takes to keep this place operating, never mind the staff and all the support services in this building? The Canadian people who, by the way, do not live in the little beltway that we live in, who watch all of this on the 11 o'clock news or read it in the morning, are saying "Why are those guys fighting all the time?"

The real essence of this place and this system is that we indeed can disagree. I have said this before. Some people would say this is

scary, but our weapons are our minds and our words and our thoughts are our ammunition. We fight with one another in this place in a very democratic way. We go to the people and say to the people, here is what we believe in as Liberals or here is what we believe in as Alliance members or Tories or NDP or Bloc, so please vote for us, and they do.

It is interesting to me that we arrived here in the numbers that we did and what happened? Those who did not win government immediately jumped up and said they want parliamentary reform. I wonder why. At least the House leader for the New Democratic Party made an honest statement in the House earlier tonight when he said this is not about changing the rules.

Many rule changes have been put forward. In fact, the committee is called the modernization committee on House rules and that is terrific. Let us modernize the rules around this place. However, it is really much more than that. The New Democratic Party member said that it is not about changing the rules but about changing the balance of power. He used that word, power, and that is true.

What we are seeing here is people who are unable to obtain power through the democratic process and now want to do it through some form of subterfuge called parliamentary reform. I do not think that is what they want at all. Every time a member over here stands up and gives an honest opinion, such as my colleague who talked about having the ability to place amendments at report stage, what happens? An opposition member jumps up and says there is a member on the backbench over there who has just said something that is really important and is it not awful, oh my, and those guys are dictators and they will not free up their backbench, like “free my people”. What is that? It is nonsense.

In my opinion, people here who denigrate the work of any member on any side denigrate themselves. We can disagree on policy and we should. We can fight over the direction we believe the country should take and we should. However, we should all carry a message that the vast majority of the men and women who arrive in this place—as they have for decades—are honest, dedicated, hard-working people who come here to make a difference.

That does not mean we should be opposed to change. However, to suggest that it is not democratic in this place is just playing politics with a system that has survived the true test of time.

Let us make some improvements at committee. I find it interesting that people say one of the ways in which we can democratize parliament is to televise our committee procedures.

Let us examine what happens when that occurs. The citizenship and immigration committee, of which I am a member, is currently dealing with amendments to the Immigration Act. It has not been dealt with in 40 years. It is very controversial. Immigration brings out tremendous debate. Some think we have too much. Some think

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we do not have enough. We do not like certain problems that occur. We hear about people who come to the country and commit crime. It gets very emotional.

• (2015)

We decided as a committee that we would televise hearings, and we did. We met in the railway room off the Hall of Honour and we were on television. On the first day of the meeting the Leader of the Opposition showed up. Would the Leader of the Opposition have been there if it were not on television? The industry committee had the ethics counsellor on television. Who showed up? The leaders of all opposition parties showed up. Would they have been there if it were not televised? Maybe they would and maybe they would not.

If it really is important that the Canadian public can watch CPAC, and I am sure Canadians are delighted to do that with a bowl of popcorn, then let us televise it. If it will make the process more open, accessible and transparent to the Canadian public, and if it will really make a difference to democracy in the country, then let us televise it all.

If all it will do is provide the opportunity for people to come in to attack, criticize and denigrate individuals in this place, then it works much more toward anarchy than democracy.

If we want to reform parliament we should do it. However as I said in my opening remarks, I fear this will be an opportunity lost. I have served on both sides of the legislative system, in opposition and in government, and I believe opposition members can have the greatest influence in reforming the way parliament does business.

If we really want to change let us take a look at how some of our committees work. Let us look at public accounts. It works tremendously well. A member of the opposition chairs that committee and there is no partisanship. We work extremely well.

When there is not too much attention from the public, the immigration committee can work extremely well. We should try to work together and respect the work we all do as parliamentarians. That would be the greatest reform. Changing the rules is not a problem. Reforming the mentality of this place so that we respect one another would be an accomplishment. It would show the Canadian public that we respect them and the democratic choice they made in the last election. We can reform parliament by reforming attitudes.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Carleton, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member talked about how this place is very democratic and how he worries that, and I believe these are his words, there would be anarchy if we did not have the status quo. I may be wrong but that is my understanding of what he said.

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I will make a few observations about this place and then talk about some other places that do not have the kind of party discipline that exists here.

To date I have seen very few occasions on which members on any side of the House, and that would include Liberal and opposition sides, have not voted the will of their party. There have been very few. It is our understanding that there was pressure applied yesterday to a member on the opposite side to make sure he voted with the government, because he has voted against the government too often and it has become an embarrassment. We all know there are tremendous pressures put on members by the party whips. I wonder how that can be described as democratic.

When we had a system of open votes in Canada there was tremendous pressure on people to vote with the governing party. Sometimes people were paid by being given alcohol. That is why liquor sales were prohibited on voting day. It was the first attempt to deal with the problem. The secret ballot was introduced, but methods were found to ensure voters would still reveal their ballot.

● (2020)

Someone might have been given a ballot by one of the parties as he or she went into the poll. The pre-marked ballot would be handed in and the ballot that had been issued upon entering the poll would be returned to the party operative waiting outside. A bottle of liquor would be given as a reward.

Counterfoils such as numbered ballot sheets and so on were developed to promote genuine democracy by creating a system of fairness and secrecy. That seems far superior to what we have here.

Literally thousands of other legislative bodies in the country do not have party discipline or parties, and there is no anarchy there at all. I am thinking of our municipal governments. I fail to see any anarchy there.

Looking at the 10 municipal governments plus a county council that exist in my own riding of Lanark—Carleton, I see that they are far more efficient, collegial, effective and frugal bodies than is this place and this government.

I look as well at the governments in two of our territories, which are run not on a partisan basis but on a collegial basis. That seems superior to the method in which the House is run. When I look at Britain's parliament in the 19th century, the golden age of parliament, although there was a party system it was in fact a very loose system.

I wonder if the hon. member would agree that perhaps there are alternative models that are superior to this one and that perhaps our model is not quite the paradise he has painted it as being.

Mr. Steve Mahoney: Mr. Speaker, I almost rest my case because the member has reacted, typically, by saying I have somehow

argued for the status quo. That attitude is what stifles true discussion in this place. The member says that unless a person is prepared to stand and buy into the line that the whole system is rotten, that we must change it and that we are all trained seals, then supposedly somehow he is in favour of the status quo. It is just not true. We can, should and will make changes to the system.

We cannot compare the situation of parliament to that of municipalities. I served in municipal government for 10 years. There was no partisanship, and there was no one sitting ready to attack and denigrate and criticize our every move. There is not much partisanship about roads and potholes and things of that nature in building municipal communities. It is a different scenario.

We literally have a situation where it does not matter what one does in government, whether one is a Liberal or a Tory or what have you. It does not matter. The system is that the opposition attacks and opposes. That is the only thing it is here for.

If we want to make parliamentary change we should try working within the committee system to support some of the activities the government is dealing with. Members on all sides would then have an opportunity to have input. It is a double-edged sword. Simply throwing it all on this side and saying it is not democracy shows, frankly, inexperience in someone who has not served on both sides of the House.

Hon. Lorne Nystrom (Regina—Qu'Appelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will say a few words in the debate as someone who has been in the House for quite a while. I was first elected in 1968. This is my ninth mandate in the House of Commons, having missed the period from 1993 to 1997. I have seen a lot of differences, and I think many of the differences are negative in terms of the lack of seriousness and respect the present government shows toward parliament.

A friend said to me a few minutes ago in the lobby that the government does not really have respect for the House of Commons. I think there is a lot of truth in that. In 1968, for example, there were a lot of great parliamentarians. I remember John Diefenbaker, Allan MacEachen, Ged Baldwin, Stanley Knowles, Tommy Douglas, David Lewis, Réal Caouette, and people of that sort.

In those days there seemed to be more respect for the House by the government and a lot more real debates would take place. I do not think a serious announcement was made by the government in the late 1960s and early 1970s that was not made on the floor of the House of Commons. The minister would come to the House, he or she would make a statement, and the response would come from the opposition parties.

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• (2025)

Gradually over time that practice changed. I think it changed more radically after the election in 1993 of the government that now sits across the way. Even in the days of Brian Mulroney and the Tories there seemed to be more give and take in this place. In those days I sat on the finance committee which was chaired by Mr. Blenkarn. It was one of many committees that had a semblance of independence about it, a certain arm's length relationship with the government.

There should be a certain amount of creative tension between the executive and parliament. Parliament should hold the executive to account. We do not have that today. That is one reason our politics have descended into a vortex of great negativity which is getting more and more negative all the time.

It does not mean that in the former days it was not positive. The member for Winnipeg—Transcona was here in 1979, I believe, and on. It was not any less partisan in those days. It was still very partisan. If we ever want to see somebody partisan, watch a John Diefenbaker or a Tommy Douglas or an Allan MacEachen. They were really partisan individuals and great parliamentarians. However there was great debate in those days and parliament really meant something. It was the centre of activity in terms of public policy in the country. Much of that is gone now.

We are heading toward a crisis in terms of this institution and the respect that it does not have across the country. Today we are having a debate in the House. As I speak I hear about 10 to 12 members speaking in the House, and that is normal. Even the members do not take this place very seriously. During the day, of course, committees are meeting at the same time. This place is getting more and more irrelevant in terms of decision-making and in terms of having a real impact. We need to take a serious look at real parliamentary reform.

In addition, we need electoral reform. We must look at the idea of bringing in a measure of proportional representation. We must do something about the Senate. I believe we should abolish it. A lot of people believe we should reform it. In the polls only 5% of the Canadian people support the existing undemocratic, unelected Senate, yet parliamentarians have continued decade after decade to support that institution across the way. We must do some of these things and do them soon.

In the House we start with the idea of confidence votes. We have far too many confidence votes in the House of Commons. We are the most handcuffed parliamentary system in the world. We model ourselves after the British parliament. It is common to have a bill defeated in the British House of Commons.

The Blair government was exceedingly popular in its first three or four years and is still popular. It has had many bills defeated by

its own backbenchers. It was the same in the days of the Thatcher Conservatives. Margaret Thatcher was extremely popular, had great control over the country in terms of her agenda and her vision, and changed that country dramatically. Despite that, there were several occasions when she lost votes in the House of Commons on certain bills. I say so what? All the better. All the more democratic.

I meet government backbenchers every day who are horrendously frustrated. At least in opposition one can get up and make a speech and criticize a policy or advocate a new vision or direction. Government members cannot do that to the extent they should because of the power of the Prime Minister's Office. The PMO and the PCO have the power to appoint cabinet ministers, committee chairs and parliamentary secretaries. They decide different trips, appointments and positions of influence.

That system must end. It must change if parliament is to be more relevant in the future. We need fewer confidence votes. The only confidence votes should be on budget bills, money bills, and things of importance like the throne speech which lays out the vision of the government for the next parliamentary session. Those things must change.

Committees must have more independence. We elect the Speaker of the House of Commons by secret ballot and the whips are not on. We have now had at least two Speakers who were probably not the favourite of the Prime Minister of the day. I am not talking just about this Prime Minister, but former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Members voted freely for the person they thought could best fill the duties of the Chair.

We cannot even take that principle to committees of the House of Commons and freely and secretly elect the person we think should chair the committee. My God, how timid we are in the House of Commons.

I will give another example. Just yesterday in the finance committee we were studying Bill C-8. It is the most voluminous bill in the history of the country. It is the financial institutions bill. It has 900 pages and affects about 1,400 pages of statutes. It is a very big bill and a very complicated bill. One of its recommendations is to set up a new consumer agency. There is supposed to be a commissioner of that consumer agency appointed by the Minister of Finance.

• (2030)

I moved a tiny amendment that said before the appointment of that commissioner of the agency, the name should be referred to the finance committee to have a look at that, not to ratify it, but to have a look at it and express an opinion. Every single government member voted no. Every single opposition member voted yes. We could not even empower ourselves to have a look at the minister's

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suggestion before the minister appointed that person. What a minuscule almost irrelevant piece of parliamentary reform, and yet we have the stupidity in this place to be so polarized.

Where the Prime Minister's office cannot control each and every thing that happens, then it is no good. I saw intelligent and highly educated men and women who went to that committee yesterday and voted nine to zip in opposition of that minuscule step. I know that probably seven of those nine would have liked to have taken that little step to reform this parliamentary institution, but they could not because of the kind of system we are locked into.

The only way it will change is if government backbenchers empower themselves and if we opposition parliamentarians empower ourselves and say no to the government from time to time, like they do in Great Britain and like they do in almost every other democratic country around the world.

There is no reason why parliamentary committees should not have more independence to initiate legislation and the independence in timetable of legislation. There is no reason why a parliamentary secretary has to come to a standing committee as a member of that particular committee and dictate how to vote on each and every single amendment.

The bill we talked about yesterday, Bill C-8, is a big bill. Hon. members should ask the member for Elk Island how long it took the finance committee to consider it yesterday. It took maybe an hour and a half. It was a futile exercise, because every single amendment that the opposition proposed, the parliamentary secretary, who was the first person recognized, would say no. All the government members voted no. All the opposition voted yes. The only amendments that were accepted were government amendments. Again, only the parliamentary secretary spoke to them. What kind of parliamentary system is this?

We have to change the system to make it more relevant. No wonder people are growing frustrated. No wonder they are not voting or participating. They rank politicians close to the bottom of the totem pole in terms of respect in this country. These are the kinds of things we should look at.

We should look at more permanent membership on parliamentary committees. We see this revolving door on these committees, mostly on the government side but not exclusively on that side. We need more permanent membership so people develop some expertise, some independence, some backbone and some gall.

I look at my friend across the way who was a respected member of the national assembly. I know he has a strong feeling about reforming this place. I know that from all the articles which were written about him two or three weeks ago in the press about making this place more meaningful. If people would think like he does and then put into action the feelings that he has, we could make some meaningful reforms in this institution.

In my last minute I want to talk about the whole question of appointments. I do not think there is any democratic country in the world where the prime minister has so much power. The Prime Minister appoints the head of the national police, the RCMP. He appoints all the justices of the supreme court. He appoints the head of the military. He appoints all the cabinet ministers. He appoints all the senators. He appoints all the heads of the crown corporations. He appoints all the heads of the important boards and agencies. He appoints all the lieutenant governors. In addition to that, he appoints thousands and thousands of people to boards and agencies.

As a result, we often get a lot of people who should not be sitting on those particular boards and agencies. There is no vetting or venting of the process by a parliamentary committee. In many cases a parliamentary committee should have the authority to either ratify or reject the nomination of the Government of Canada. What is so radical about that? At the very least, the Parliament of Canada, through a relevant committee, should review many more of these appointments.

Parliament itself should have more timetables. We should have a timetable to set throne speeches, set budgets and a fixed election date to take that power away from the executive and the Prime Minister of Canada, and put more power back into the hands of the people through their elected representatives, the people elected in all parties in this House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first I would like to make a comment and then ask a question.

The hon. member for Regina—Qu'Appelle has a lot of experience in the House of Commons, because he has been here for many years.

● (2035)

Let me give an example. This evening, I attended a meeting of the parliamentary committee on employment insurance dealing with Bill C-2. Parliamentarians, those whom we call backbenchers, even on the government side, would have had an opportunity to express themselves democratically, to propose changes and amendments to the employment insurance program.

It is as if these people had been told by the minister "No, there must not be any amendment from the opposition. That is unacceptable". We have a supposedly democratic process. Yet, in committee, it is so obvious that all opposition members vote one way, while all government members vote the other way. It is as if there was no justice.

This is where I find there is no democracy. There is no democracy at all in committee or in the House. I see Liberal backbenchers complain and moan because they never have an opportunity to express their views. But when they do, sometimes they do not seize it. Has this been going on only since 1993 or for a longer time?

Hon. Lorne Nystrom: Mr. Speaker, it is worse now than it was 20 or 30 years ago. I well remember in 1968, when I was first elected, that there was greater respect for the Parliament of Canada. In the days of Mr. Diefenbaker, Mr. Douglas, Mr. Al MacEachen, and Mr. Ged Baldwin, there were many great parliamentarians.

As I said, any ministerial statement was made here in the House of Commons. This was the place that was the most important back then, but in the last 15 or 25 years, a lack of respect for the Parliament of Canada has gradually set in.

I think this system has very quickly changed with the present government, which was elected in 1993. Under the Mulroney government, there was greater respect for parliamentary committees. I clearly remember the Standing Committee on Finance, which was chaired by Mr. Blenkarn. I also have very clear memories of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which was chaired by another Progressive Conservative member.

The finance and foreign affairs committees had a certain independence, as did many parliamentary committees. That was 8, 9, 10 or 15 years ago.

Now, however, committees are often playpens for government backbenchers. This is not right. This is not a good parliamentary system. We need democracy in the House of Commons. We need an important role for members from all regions of Canada.

It is very important to have parliamentary reform, to have real democracy here. Even in England, there have been a number of occasions where the government was defeated by its own backbenchers. This was a reality for Mr. Blair. It was a reality for Margaret Thatcher and for John Major. This was a reality in England.

In our country, everyone must vote with the party. This is not right, this in no way resembles a real parliamentary system. This is not a system that is good for the collective health of Canadians.

Mr. Clifford Lincoln (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the most traditional institutions, churches and monarchies, are becoming democratic today because they realize they have to be closer to the people. They have to live with the times. However, our parliament here is so stuck in tradition it is ridiculous.

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Here is one small example. When the Speaker rises, the three pages required to sit at his feet rise as well. If he sits, they sit. What is the point of all this? Has it improved the life of the pages? I think it is symptomatic of a tradition that, today, is completely outmoded, undemocratic and does not improve the life of the pages who come here.

I think about all our colleagues here. Do we call them by their name? No. We speak of "the hon. member for Bellechasse—Etchemins—Montmagny—L'Islet" or of "the hon. member for Hastings—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington".

• (2040)

[*English*]

Just five minutes ago one of his colleagues from the same party could not remember the member's riding. Does this help parliamentarians to get to know each other?

I have been to many parliaments where people call each other by their names. It is no sin to call someone Smith or Tremblay. They get to know each other. The irony of this place is that in here I am an hon. member for Lac-Saint-Louis. When I get to a committee I am no longer hon. I am Lincoln. What sense does that make? If it is good for a committee, why should it not be good here?

I find that in committee I can put a name and a face to people. There is a certain human bond that develops, while here there is this sterile thing. I pity your job, Mr. Speaker, you have to remember all these quaint names, sometimes four or five in a row. That should be changed. We should live in our times. I would like to be able to call the member for Regina—Qu'Appelle by name. It would be far friendlier than calling him by his riding name.

As for votes, I really believe very deeply that our system of calling all votes confidence votes, with free votes being the exception, should be reversed. All votes should be free votes except for confidence votes. They should become the exception.

I will just give a few figures from the British house which I gleaned some time ago. In the British house of commons, dissenting votes have been a significant fact of life for a long time. In the seventies dissenting votes accounted for 25% of all voting divisions in the British parliament. In the first session of 1983-1987, when the Tories were in power, 62 divisions took place in which 137 Tory backbenchers cast a total of 416 votes against the government.

Here that would be viewed as heresy because any type of expression that is contrary to the wish of the government is seen as disloyalty. I do not see it as disloyalty. I see it as intelligence. I see it as being accountable to my conscience and to my electors. I separate completely confidence votes, which are a fact of life and

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must be in a government, from the rest of the votes where we could vote very freely and the government would carry on all the same, and be no worse for it.

With regard to a code of ethics, in 1997 the present Speaker, the member for Kingston and the Islands, was co-chair of a committee that produced a code of official conduct for senators and members of parliament. Some of the members here were part of that committee. The report is still lying on the shelf. Why can we not institute that code of official conduct for all members and for senators? Why can we not make this official? Why can we not have a counsellor responsible to the Parliament of Canada? I do not see any reason why this should not become a part of our rules that govern our conduct as parliamentarians. That should be an essential and a prompt reform to institute.

When we talk about private members' bills, for six years I have had private members' bills that have just stayed in there. Recently I won. By magic my name got drawn, like the 649. Then I appeared before a committee and it decided that the bill was not important enough to be votable. So for one hour I had a little debate here and the bill died.

I look again at what happens in the British parliament. The differences are striking. In the British parliament, during the years 1983-1987, out of 415 private members' bills introduced in the British House, 70 of them were given royal assent, or 17%.

In our parliament, between May 13, 1991 to February 2, 1996, four and three quarter years, 428 private members' bills were introduced. Out of those, 163 were selected and only eight became statutes. Only 5% of bills were selected and a mere 2% became statutes. These bills made lacrosse and hockey national games and silly things like that. Very few items of substance are ever made into statutes.

• (2045)

The British house had 70 bills that became statutes, which gave a feeling of dignity and a feeling of empowerment to members of parliament who were otherwise viewed as backbenchers only good for coming to vote.

This reform needs to be carried out very promptly. All private members' bills should be made votable. We should have enough help to put private members' bills through. Admittedly let us have a limit on private members' bills. It could be one per member. I do not care. However let us have a chance to debate them.

If the majority of our colleagues vote against it, I will be the first to agree. Let us give a chance for them to be debated so that a measure which we feel is good enough to be debated by our colleagues has at least a slight chance of becoming a statute. Otherwise, why have it at all?

I also believe that committees should be much freer to vote. I am quite happy as the chair of a committee today to see my position being voted in by my colleagues. I also believe that during the examination of legislation committees should be very free and open. Parliamentary secretaries should sit as expert witnesses for committees rather than be part of a committee.

I was in the National Assembly of Quebec as a minister. I had to appear as a minister to defend my legislation right through. I know the task of ministers is sometimes impossible. Therefore let the parliamentary secretary take over that function rather than sit as a member of the committee during the study of legislation.

I also believe the Board of Internal Economy in the House of Commons should be made more open. Certainly I do not disparage the members, including you, Mr. Speaker, who sit on the board with great diligence and conscience. However it should be made far more open.

Committee chairs from day to day do not quite know how their budgets will be met. Halfway through the year they have to beg for another travel allowance. It should be far more open, far more transparent. There should be far more input by members of the committees, chairs of the committees and House members.

We have a lot of reform to do. I would love to talk about other items such as electoral reform and the powers of the executive office, but I sincerely believe we have to start somewhere. Within the standing orders I think we can make reforms to parliament that will not make me less a Liberal, less a part of a government or less a part of an opposition if I were voted into opposition.

I will fight very hard for the things I believe in. At the same time I will feel empowered. I will feel dignified as a member of parliament. I will feel that the little intelligence I have been given, the little creative powers I have been given, have a chance to be expressed and find their way forward rather than just be there for duty times, be there for votes when I am supposed to vote a certain way, and be there always as a backbencher.

How can we be hon. members and backbenchers at the same time? It does not make any sense to me. There is a contradiction in terms. I would rather be a plain mister but have some powers. I would rather be a plain mister and feel that I can make much more of a contribution to this place than I do today.

The rules deserve to be reopened and looked at again. We should look at what the Finns do, what the Swedes do and what the Brits do. Then we could say that surely there must be a way to improve this place which is not against traditions, against rules, against the government or against the opposition. It will make the place better, not only for all of us but for all Canadians.

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• (2050)

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to acknowledge that I have total respect, looking at the Liberal side, for every member in his or her seat over there. That has to be taken in the context of the present situation. I will not go any further because I know the rules of the House. We have many silly rules, and everyone here knows what I am talking about.

I have exceptionally high respect for the member who just spoke. I agreed with much of what he said. I was intrigued with his statements with respect to free votes, confidence votes. I believe very strongly that democracy would be strengthened and the rules in this august Chamber which apply to all citizens of the country would be enhanced. We would have better legislation. We would make better laws if we were able sometimes to defeat or improve a faulty motion or amendment.

My question for the member is very specific. We are dealing today with changes to the standing orders. I know he has a lot of knowledge in this area. How would he specifically propose a change to the standing orders that would allow for more non-confidence votes? How would he change the standing orders, or is it strictly a matter within each party's purview to implement?

Mr. Clifford Lincoln: Mr. Speaker, the question of declaring which votes are confidence and which votes are non-confidence depends primarily on the executive. I do not think the standing orders would establish that. It would be left to the executive.

It would be part of the overall reform of parliament if we had a broadly based task force, working group or whatever. It would include House leaders and MPs from all sectors who believe passionately in parliamentary reform in a constructive fashion. We could arrive at some sort of modus vivendi which included issues like the way we vote.

We could arrive at it the way the Brits did: by trial and error. I do not know who started it, whether it was members of the Labour Party or of the Conservative Party, but they started it at one point by saying that cross voting was quite acceptable. They started a tradition of goals: one week goals, two week goals and three week goals. They decided among themselves to establish a tradition on grading legislation including confidence votes.

Now it is a given that dissenting votes in Britain do not mean that a Conservative is less conservative or that a Labour Party member is less a member of labour. They established a tradition whereby they respect the rules and confidence votes are binding. I think we could establish that here without too many problems.

Mr. Rick Borotsik (Brandon—Souris, PC): I like the change to the rules already, Mr. Speaker. I too agree. I have a lot of respect for

the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Louis and I listened to what he had to say with great respect.

In my short tenure in the House I have found when legislation comes forward and is placed on the floor of the House it is almost a fait accompli. The ministers, the bureaucrats and the departments have gone through the whole process, come forward with a piece of legislation, dumped it on the floor and did not listen to any other ideas on changes to the legislation to make it better. They do not listen to backbench members in private members' business who might have some pretty good legislative ideas.

Does the member agree that there should be more influence from members with respect to the presentation of legislation? Does the member agree that perhaps private members should have the opportunity of putting forward legislation or helping implement legislation that comes forward to the House without the minister of the particular department interfering with the legislation?

• (2055)

Mr. Clifford Lincoln: Mr. Speaker, I might be viewed by some as radical. I do not think I am a radical, but at the same time I believe I am here to use my brain in the best way I can to try improve legislation if I feel it should be improved.

If somebody from the opposition has a better idea than I have, I am prepared to accept it. If a matter arises where the legislation would be better if an amendment were made to it by the government or the opposition, we should be open to look at it. That is the way I have always done it either as a member of the House or the chair of a committee.

The more we do this, the more it will build mutual respect, if it were on the basis that members of the opposition understood that government members had constraints just like they do. Eventually trust is built. Sometimes a hard line is taken and people accept it because they know it is part of the system. At the same time fairness and openness are used to the greatest degree possible. That is the way it should go.

The Deputy Speaker: I understand two colleagues would be interested in splitting a 10 minute block. Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester, PC): Mr. Speaker, there are lots of moments in the House when one is not proud to be part of it, but tonight I feel we are here to improve the House and its functions. It is quite refreshing and quite exciting. I hope we are successful in achieving the goal of improving the effectiveness of members of parliament and the effectiveness of parliament itself.

From my point of view as a member of parliament who has been here on and off since 1988, the first and most important thing that could be changed is the committee system. We have a circus in

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committees right now. The chairs are predetermined and selected by ministers. Voting is distorted and contorted. It is set up so that only one person can win the chair of a committee. That in itself sets the tone of the committee and makes it far less effective.

Committees would be much more effective if we had secret ballots in the same way as we choose the Speaker. It is just as important to have secret ballots on the agenda.

On the transport committee in the last parliament we went through a series of determinations of important issues to be discussed. We went from 15 issues to 8 to 6 to 2. Just as we were to decide which one we would take up next, the minister announced that he wanted us to do something else. All government members agreed with him and that is what we did. It was not on the list. It was not what we were to do.

If the agendas of the committees could be set by secret ballot they would be much more effective and productive.

Parliamentary secretaries are like policemen at committees. They are there to ensure government members fall in line and do exactly what they are supposed to do. They should not be there. If they are there, they should be there as witnesses.

We should have the power to initiate legislation and the freedom to make amendments much more in line with what is appropriate for the particular issue.

We should have transcripts from committees much faster. It takes weeks and weeks for the public to get a transcript from a committee, at which time the bill could have gone through final reading in the House and have been passed. What is the point of having a transcript so much later?

In Britain there is a limit of two weeks for transcripts to get out to the public, and that is the way it should be here. There is no reason it cannot be done.

• (2100)

Access to information is a thorn in my side. I have seen my ability to do my job weakened by changes in the access to information application and government policy. When I apply for access to information I usually get a number of pages, half of which have nothing on them and some of which are all blanked out, with the important parts taken out. It distorts the whole purpose of the access to information system. It could be extremely effective and helpful to us in doing our job. First we are stalled. Then we get abridged versions and distorted versions. In fact, in many cases they are just simply useless.

Another thing that is happening is that as the government divests operations we are losing access to information. A good example is

NavCan, the system that controls air traffic control. When it was under Transport Canada we could access information on air traffic controller incident reports, their complaints and concerns. We could access structural reports on air traffic control towers. We can no longer do that because it is divested to NavCan.

Confidence votes are almost the rule and they should not be. We should have free votes on many more issues than we have. Everything is confidence now, even trivial issues. Government members are told to stay in line or they will pay a huge price.

Questions on the order paper take too long to get answered. We could use questions on the order paper much more to our advantage and to the advantage of the Canadian people if there were a shorter time limit. Why does it take more than seven days to answer a question on the order paper? There is no reason. That is something that should be addressed.

Yesterday the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced in London, England, that we had changed our policy toward India. That is an abuse of parliament. He should come here and make that announcement.

We should have more access to committees and much more effective committees. I only hope the exercise we are about to go through is not smoke and mirrors. We have the opportunity to improve things, and I hope we do.

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. If the member goes over his time we should arrange it so that the other person's time is reduced by the same amount so that together they get 15 minutes.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Lincoln): The member has two and a half minutes for questions and comments.

Mr. Rick Borotsik (Brandon—Souris, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will not take the full two and a half minutes, so perhaps it could be tacked on to the intervention of my colleague from St. John's West.

I have one very quick question and the member just briefly touched on it. As one member across the way said, it is contempt of parliament. Recently we have talked about ministers who prefer to go to the news media, to a press conference, and to outside organizations to make policy announcements that should be made in the House.

Could the member expand on that a little? The time for questions and comments could then go to my good friend from St. John's West.

Mr. Bill Casey: Mr. Speaker, I will just use the example I mentioned. Yesterday the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced a change in our policy toward India. That affects the foreign affairs committee but we were not told.

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We were not given any advance notice. We were not given any opportunity to comment, question, criticize, advise or maybe make improvements to the policy. It did not come to parliament. We had no opportunity to deal with the issue in the House.

It has become pervasive. The government does it more and more. It makes announcements in the media. It does not bring them to the House. It does not give us a chance to comment. It is a very serious issue. It is moving away from tradition and precedence.

Mr. Loyola Hearn (St. John's West, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to participate in such a discussion this evening. It is a pleasure to partake in such an interesting exercise. Today is a great day to have such a debate because it is international day for the elimination of discrimination.

• (2105)

Many of us are wearing multicoloured ribbons representing the different nations within our country. I wonder, as many of Canadians watch the debate this evening, what they are saying about us? What do they say about us every day when they watch this honourable House? We must remember that people outside the Chamber only see what is portrayed on television and only hear news reports. Quite often it is not very pretty.

It was an honour this evening, Mr. Speaker, to listen to you, to listen to my leader earlier, and to listen to the member for Regina—Qu'Appelle. If my French serves me right, qu'appelle means what calls. The question we might ask is what is calling us to be here tonight? Unfortunately there are not too many of us, but why are we here?

An hon. member: You are whipped.

Mr. Loyola Hearn: It is not because of our whip, with all due respect to my colleague. Some of us who are in the Chamber at this late hour, and some who will stay even later, believe in the institution. We also believe that perhaps tonight we can make some difference.

What concerns us is who is not here. I know we cannot draw attention to individuals but let us draw attention to classes. The people who hold the power may not have the same concerns about what happens in this great Chamber as those who perhaps are abused by the power that some people hold.

Mr. Dennis Mills: They are listening.

Mr. Loyola Hearn: We hope they are listening and we hope that they learn. All of us have learned tonight from all those who have participated.

We could ask for many things to be changed. Practically all of them are on the record already. We could talk about ministerial statements that should be made in the House so that there is a chance to respond and people across the country understand what has been announced, particularly if those statements refer to policy and financial items.

We should see ministers here during the late show when we have questions but are not satisfied with the answers we receive. We ask for more deliberation so that they can understand what we are talking about. We should not have their parliamentary secretaries rushing in with a prepared text to slough off members with an answer prepared by someone else. That is not learning about the problems which confront the country and problems which they as government ministers should be doing something about.

We are also looking at the time it takes to pass legislation and comparing it to the time wasted in this honourable Chamber. Tonight I returned from having dinner with a group of young students who are here in a forum of young Canadians. I asked them as they sat at my table what they thought of their visit to the House. They were impressed, as anyone would be who comes here, but they also said that the decorum is certainly not what it should be and that we waste a lot of time.

Prior to the dissolution of the House when the election was called I saw all the bills that died on the order paper, particularly bills like the employment insurance one that left a lot of people in dire straits for the fall and winter. I wonder how many of these bills could have been passed if we did not procrastinate.

I know my time is short but let me say that despite all the suggestions being made by everyone in relation to the work of the committees, the performance of ministers, the methods and mechanisms of pushing through legislation, if we are to attain change in this honourable Chamber it has to come from the heart of each and every one of us.

We need the intelligence and the imagination to envision what this Chamber should be and what it can do. If each and every one of us, elected by our constituents, does what we were elected to do, we will not have to worry about parliamentary change. It will happen automatically.

• (2110)

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton Southwest, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the hon. member on a wonderful speech. What really deserves credit is the fact that he described his affection for parliament. That is very important.

It is very important for those who do not want parliamentary reform to understand that those who want parliamentary reform do it from an affection, a love and a respect for this place. We do not do it because we do not respect parliament. It is in fact the exact opposite. We respect and love this place and want it to be what it should be. That is why we ask for parliamentary reform. I very much appreciated that comment in the hon. member's speech.

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I want to ask him a specific question about quorum. He mentioned that we should probably increase quorum so that we have more members in the House and the debates are livelier and more deliberative. This place should be a national debating body. The whole notion of deliberation, of give and take, of debate back and forth, and of the tension between the opposition and the government side, is what produces good governance. Would he comment on whether we should increase the quorum requirements of the House of Commons?

Mr. Loyola Hearn: Mr. Speaker, a number of years ago I came from the government side of a legislature where our leader gave us a fair amount of flexibility. I then spent three years in opposition where I saw premier number one pull the plug on Meech Lake despite the wishes of the majority.

I also came from the same legislature where I saw the same leader lead a vote of non-confidence in the speaker because he was caught short on quorum. I have seen many people try to make good speeches and nobody listened. That was unfortunate. How can we individually react and do anything about the problems in the country or parliamentary reform if we are not even listening or we are not even concerned with what is going on?

I agree with the hon. member that we should always have a large number in the House so that the give and take will lead to positive results.

Mr. Dennis Mills (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was inspired to come to this community and ultimately participate in electoral politics back in 1980 by the Right Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau. I remember one day in debate in 1983 when we were chatting about certain issues. He stood in the House and said that the essence of the Chamber was to speak for those who did not have a voice and that the essence of our work was to support those who needed our help when they needed it most. That has been my compass.

Before I get into my direct comments on why this place needs to be more effective, Mr. Speaker, your courage and your inspiration are very similar to those of Mr. Trudeau. Your speech earlier tonight in the House of Commons on how we need to reform to make this place more effective and more relevant very much reminded me of Mr. Trudeau.

On June 5, 2000, I wrote an article for the *Hill Times* in which I talked about parliamentary democracy. I know a couple of times today I have been quoted on the fact that we are nothing more than voting machines, that the place is irrelevant and that it is a car with a broken engine. I stand by everything I said on June 5.

Tonight I celebrate the fact that the leadership of all parties has finally made a public confession that it is time to take the engine of this place into the repair shop and make it more relevant. That is a great thing.

• (2115)

When I stand here tonight I think of my constituents. They are kind of wondering about committees, special motions and all the different rules of the House. They do not understand any of that. They elected me to come here and work on the issues that I ran on in the last election.

One of those issues, for example, is the whole struggle that we are having to get more affordable housing in the downtown Toronto area. I know it is a national problem but I am speaking to my constituents tonight. They wonder what is going on, that after I ran on a certain issue, the government ran on a certain issue, the Prime Minister takes a lead on a certain issue, I was elected on November 27 and then I come up here and nothing happens. They do not get it. They cannot figure it out. I have to confess that I also cannot figure it out and I have been here for 13 years.

To be brutally frank, and I say this to all members of the House, I am totally fed up with the current system. I am not fed up because it will make any difference to me personally. What bothers me is the contempt that the entire machinery of government has toward each and every member of the House of Commons. I do not care what party it is, it is contempt. Those are strong words but I stand by them.

I have, through access to information, documents in my possession showing that departments of government have passed on memos saying what they will feed up to the minister or to the MPs so that they will stop bothering them. That happened when I tried to serve my constituents.

Mr. Speaker, we go back 13 years. I pray and hope that under your watch we can make this House of Commons work the way it is supposed to work. It has to start. I worked my guts out in 1984 to help the Prime Minister become not only the leader of my party but the Prime Minister of Canada. I have immense love and respect for him, but I do not have respect for the 800 men and women in the Privy Council Office who, in no way shape or form, reflect the experience of the populist approach that the Prime Minister has had throughout his 35 years of serving parliament and the country.

I support all the recommendations from my colleague for Lac-Saint-Louis but I want one other amendment to come to parliamentary reform. I want one day a week, or maybe one day a month if that is all we can get, to be contempt for parliament day, a day where MPs can bring to the House examples of where they have tried to serve their constituents on issues that are government policy but could not get a response, of where they tried to get service for their constituents but the bureaucrat's response was that they should call the minister's office. Does that mean that a public or city councillor can call the bureaucrat but a member of

parliament cannot call him or her and get service without going through a minister's office? That is crap. That is not the way to run a country.

• (2120)

I do not think parliamentary reform will ever take root until we create an environment where the machinery of government, the public service, responds to all of us as we try to serve the public and our constituents. I submit to the House that this is not happening today.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is good to see you in the chair. I know that parliamentary reform is something that is very much on your mind and on the minds of many members here tonight. Throughout the coming days and weeks I am hoping that we can keep this spirit alive.

Many members have engaged in the debate throughout the past number of hours. I commend the hon. member from Edmonton who has a long career ahead of him as a parliamentarian and has shown a great many insights already that will serve us well.

I would like to put a question to the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth. As he has pointed out, he is a long serving member and he has expressed very eloquently a frustration that many members feel from all corners and all parties. He has focused in on one of the key problems that we are wrestling with and finding some difficulty in articulating, the bureaucratic influence that exists.

It appears that the levers of powers given to elected representatives have somehow been stripped away, watered down or diminished. A simple example the member used was of a member being able to access information on behalf of a constituent. It would normally take weeks or months to get a response. We would normally punch in a telephone number of one department only to be sent off to another department or to another province. We may have called our local office only to get another city in another province. He knows the problem. He has encountered it as have many of the members here.

How do we change this institutionalized attitude that appears to exist? It is a non-partisan issue because it has evolved, as have a lot of the problems, but how do we change the mindset or the attitude that seems to exist within the bureaucracy? Should we limit terms for members and senior civil servants? Is there a way we can police the bureaucracy more effectively?

Mr. Dennis Mills: Mr. Speaker, my recommendation in our list of parliamentary reforms is that we have a contempt for parliament day. On that day, the clerk of the Privy Council would sit here and be responsible for the complaints on behalf of constituents that come to the clerk. He could then fan them out to his deputies. We

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could then get a better service to the public. I do not see it any other way.

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I am intrigued by the speech that the hon. member has just given. Without being personal, I will make this statement so general that it will not attack an individual member here.

Surely he must agree that the way things work around here, and specifically with respect to the PMO and Privy Council, that this is a function of the executive branch of government. It has to be within their ability to change that and to reign it in.

Is that not where we should be working in the House of Commons instead of blaming bureaucrats?

• (2125)

Mr. Dennis Mills: Mr. Speaker, we are not here tonight blaming anyone. We are here tonight renewing ourselves. All of us in the House have to blame ourselves for the way we have allowed the pendulum to swing away from us. I put myself at the top of the list. I have turned the other cheek too many times on behalf of my constituents. I should have been tougher many years ago.

There is one thing all my colleagues must learn, which I learned a long time ago when I used to work in the Prime Minister's office. A highly respected senior bureaucrat once said that if we allow resistance, we will get resistance. I must confess that over the last number of years I have allowed too much resistance when I should have been more forceful on behalf of my constituents.

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, we are having an interesting debate today and it is absolutely vital for me, as a new member in the House, to be able to speak to it.

The House of Commons, as far as I am concerned, has to return to the people of Canada. Parliamentary reform has taken far too long and is long over. The rights and responsibilities of members of parliament to represent the views of their constituents has disappeared. The government seems much more concerned about maintaining power than representing the will of the people.

The House of Commons is the people's parliament. It is the voice of the common people of Canada. We must make it responsive to the people of Canada.

I took my seat here only a few short months ago and I have already come to recognize, despite the efforts of hard-working individuals from all sides of the House, that this place is no more than a voting machine. Last night I witnessed 16 motions being voted on in a few minutes, rubber stamp laws that were mainly drawn up by unelected bureaucrats from the Prime Minister's office.

It is up to the members of parliament, the government and the opposition to take parliament back. We must take parliament back.

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I came believing that I could offer some constructive input on pressing legislation and engage in serious debate on important issues. Instead, I saw an example yesterday of where we turned our back on a very important issue, an economic fibre of our country, the agriculture crisis. Many members were not even allowed to debate on it. However, we can go all night tonight on this one.

The mechanism of government was inherited by a proven British parliamentary system created by the Fathers of Confederation. They answered the great question: Should the chief power of the country be the king or parliament? They determined that they would be governed by the people and not by the will of one man. It is an illusion if one thinks that Canadians live in a democracy. We are controlled by the Prime Minister.

My grandfather fought in both world wars. He went to war defending the rights of democracy so that we could stand in the House today to debate. He fought for freedom. Young men and women, aged 18, 19 and 20 years old, gave up their lives so that we could be here to debate. It is sad for me to think that the people of Canada have been conquered by a dictator without a shot being fired.

We can change that by free votes. We can work toward reforming parliament. There are a lot of things that have been talked about today, all of them very worthy of note, but for me the greatest change would come with the free vote of every member in the House, because it is up to us to vote the will of the people who sent us here.

Have governments forgotten that only four short months ago the citizens of the country elected each one of us into our seats? In four short months we have forgotten who we represent. We need to shift how government works and to be responsive to those who put us here.

• (2130)

As I see it, we are bribing Canadians with their own tax dollars, and there is wasteful spending on unnecessary programs and unaccountable government. Cabinet is barking to the tune of the bureaucrats and special interest groups. Free votes will set us on a path for parliamentary reform and that is a path that we need to get on really quickly as far as I am concerned.

A real interesting concept is that government members believe that if the government introduces a bill that is defeated or if an opposition bill, motion or amendment is passed it would bring down the government and they would have to resign. It is beyond me where that idea comes from. It is archaic.

The Prime Minister coerces backbenchers into believing that voting the will of the constituents would bring the government down. That would not bring the government down at all. Voting for their constituencies and constituents would make the government stronger and Canada stronger.

Liberal backbenchers have been forced into something that the Prime Minister wants. He has been bullying them around, sort of like a schoolyard bully, but bullies are only powerful as long as no one stands up to them and no one really challenges them or thinks around their bullying.

I know that the hon. members across the way are truly hard working people. I have talked to many of them. Now is their chance to stand up. Not many of them but a few of them are in the House right now. They can talk to their colleagues and do something for Canada that is beyond anything they have done to this point.

There are 301 members elected to the House of Commons. We have the power to implement change. We set the rules. We were entrusted to make the laws of this country. I am not asking members to vote for something they do not believe in, but I will not be holding my breath that the Prime Minister will come through that door any time soon, unmuzzle the backbenchers over there and allow free votes in this place.

As democratically elected members of parliament, we do have the power to make the change. We could make it as early as tomorrow morning, if we had the political will to do so, by passing a motion that we truly have free votes in this place. All it would take is 30 Liberal backbenchers to live up to their potential and to influence government in a way they have never influenced it before. That is all it would take. We could change Canada and never go back. That is how easy it could be.

I do not believe in blaming the bureaucrats. I believe it is our duty. We need to do something about it and we need to do it soon. Backbench MPs have that potential to be more than just voting machines. I would challenge them to do it, to be more, because they owe it to themselves and they owe it to this country.

I am proud that I can represent the people of Yellowhead who have chosen me to be here as their representative in the House of Commons. They trust me to inform them of the problems, seek their opinions and vote their will. After being in parliament for only a few months, I have already realized that my ability to represent my constituents has been hampered by the Prime Minister's obsession for power. If he were really interested in creating the legacy he talks about, he would implement parliamentary reform himself. However, we do not have to wait for the Prime Minister. We can implement it now. We have the power to do it and we should.

Right after the election of November 27, 2000, I came to Ottawa with a few MPs for orientation. They were from all sides of the House. We were excited. We had just been elected. We had just been given the opportunity to change Canada, to lead Canada, to make a difference in this country. I was excited about it and I am still excited about it. As I talked to the other MPs, they said they

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were excited about the concept of a free vote. They thought it was something they could and should do.

It is interesting now to see how disappointing it is that they have fallen victim to the system and have thrown away their ideals and their principles. If these walls could speak, they would tell us about the great leaders who have sat in these same chairs and who have fought for a better Canada, who have done what was right for their constituencies.

I am calling on every member of the House to live up to the vision of the founding fathers and to vote for a motion to allow free votes, because members owe it to this country. It is the greatest country in the world and we need to protect it. We can do it and we should do it now.

• (2135)

Mr. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wanted to raise a point when the member for Toronto—Danforth made his points. I just want to put on the record that I do agree with a lot of what he said. We do not really need to change the system in here; we need to change it totally, starting at the Privy Council Office and on down.

However, the member who just spoke talked a lot about free votes. I really think on that point that I look at every vote as a free vote in the House. I vote my conscience. If I want to vote against my party, I can.

The member mentioned that if these walls could speak, but if these walls could speak they would tell us that there have been more free votes since 1993 in the House than ever in its history. Those are the facts. That is reality. There is not this great restriction. In fact, we have seen more members vote different from their party on this side of the House, the governing party, than we have seen in the member's party, the Canadian Alliance, over the last number of years.

I just want to point out that I agree with free votes, but they are not the do all and end all in terms of changing everything in this place. I was not able to be here for a lot of this evening, but I listened to a fair bit of the debate on TV. I really like what I see tonight. There is a good spirit in the House, with good discussion, good debate and good ideas, and I think we need to carry it further.

However, I just want to point out to the member opposite that free votes in and of themselves will not be the do all and end all in terms of changing how this place operates, because we have had more free votes with this government than ever before in our history, but it may not be enough.

Mr. Rob Merrifield: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question. I would just like to explain that in the time I have been

here, in the time that I have witnessed, I do not have to go back very far to see that what the hon. member is saying about free votes has been stifled very significantly. I just have to go back one day, because yesterday we saw many of the backbench Liberals vote against a bill that they honestly believed should have been there. We know that from witnessing it on agriculture, as he may have believed.

What I am suggesting is that the free vote is a place to start. There has been a lot of good discussion here today and I appreciate all of it. I agree with the hon. member that there are some very good ideas about parliamentary reform. I also believe that it has to start with the free vote. If we did that, it would pave the way for everything to flow out of it. That is what I am suggesting.

Mr. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Ajax—Uxbridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Yellowhead. I appreciate his candour. Of course he has certainly distinguished himself as a new member of parliament and I am pleased to see him enter a debate that I think is so important, not just to the essence of what this place is but, more important, to what we are as Canadians and what we share in common.

Earlier this evening we heard the hon. House leader talk about the notion of at least being able to ensure that we have more meaningful debate and opportunity for members on both sides of the House to provide amendments to opposition day motions, the so-called practice that has been around since 1994, with the hon. member's previous party, in which the opposition splits its time and as a result effectively forecloses on any opportunity for meaningful debate by simply putting the word immediate after its own motion.

Would the hon. member not agree, then, with the House leader's position that perhaps we could encourage the very thing he is looking for? We have members on this side like myself, who on two occasions has tried to provide meaningful amendments. That might allow members on this side of the House to join with the members, as we might have yesterday, on a very important debate.

Mr. Rob Merrifield: Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of different ideas about how reform should happen in this place. We have talked a lot about them and we have heard almost all of them today. I could get into the details of that one and many more. I would prefer to keep my focus exactly on where I think we should start.

• (2140)

Where we should start is the free vote. We should start with being able to do what our constituents want us to do and that is to vote their will in the House. If we did that, then we would bring meaningful debate into this place. Right now we do not have that. I have not seen it. We can get into all those other details, but I would

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rather not because I want to keep my focus on where the fundamentals are and then work from there.

Mr. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Ajax—Uxbridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for Yellowhead.

Part of the process of parliamentary reform perhaps includes some of the more subtle parts of the ways in which the practices of the House have evolved over the years and have been so important in providing the kinds of routines that allow us to discharge our functions day in and day out.

Mr. Speaker, it is an honour for you to be in the chair this evening, particularly as I give my perspective in terms of parliamentary reform, because I think it is rather poignant that a debate which took place some time ago, a contest that I am very proud we both had an opportunity to run in, was really, in my view, the beginning of a new phase with respect to the issue of parliamentary reform. Some two months or a month and a half after that deliberation, we now see ourselves, unlike other parliaments, still continuing in the need to look at and study the issue of improving the relationship that members of parliament have with the House and, more important, with their constituents.

The opportunity for us to speak today as a result of an agreement by all House leaders is one that I believe is of essential and extreme importance to all members of parliament. Parliamentary reform is an issue that concerns many Canadians. What we are in fact discussing today centres on the future viability of parliament and the value of those who have been sent here to represent the interests of their constituents.

One of the most interesting things that has happened, which has been discussed by various members in the House this evening, has been the question of the disconnect, to some extent, among constituents, Canadians and their voting patterns. However, I think the more disturbing trend might be encapsulated by those who observe and who I believe do not do so with a political bias. These are people such as Peter Dobell, who in his recent report entitled *Reforming Parliamentary Practice: The Views of MPs*, wrote:

In no other British-type legislature has the shift of power to the executive proceeded further than in the Canadian federal House of Commons.

There is obviously some tension with respect to this negative view and the idea that perhaps the House of Commons may not be able to continue to be relevant as long as power and decision making is so intently focused in one area.

I believe we have been placed in the unenviable position of trying to represent, as members of parliament, the views of constituents to bring forth worthwhile ideas, while at the same time realizing that very little can be done to accomplish this without the approval of the executive.

One of the items that has not been discussed at great length this evening and which I would like to touch upon is an area that I think all members of parliament can readily agree with. That is the notion of our private members' business. I look across and I know there are members of parliament who have helped this member in particular pass two pieces of legislation. One, Mr. Speaker, was passed with your help in 1996 with respect to organ donation. The other was with the help of members across the way, including the Minister of Justice, with respect to the issue of pursuit. It was the first change of the criminal code by a backbencher.

There are changes that reflect the essence and the meaningfulness of what members of parliament really must challenge and must bring forth in the House of Commons beyond question period in order to ensure that this place continues to be ever more relevant.

However, there is a problem. Some of this issue can be solved not simply with respect to the standing orders. I think all members of parliament in the House would agree that private members' business is something that is far more important. It might give an opportunity to members of parliament to see their positions effectively and, to some extent, properly addressed if we were to make all private members' business votable. It is reverse onus on members of parliament not to come forward with frivolous propositions in terms of legislation.

• (2145)

If members of parliament truly believe in what they are saying, and they truly believe that what they are advocating on behalf of their constituents is worthy enough of being on the floor of the House of Commons, then we owe it to members of parliament and to Canadians to ensure that members of parliament become accountable not to their colleagues and peers, but to the Canadians which they represent.

Each and every one of us has within our own right the privilege of being here. It is with the private members' business that I believe members of parliament can work with this side of the House and vice versa, by working on issues over and above the precious issues of the day that come up for 45 minutes, which you are no doubt familiar with, Mr. Speaker, with respect to question period. I believe we have an opportunity here to give members of parliament the hand up that they need to pick one, maybe two issues, in every parliament which they can broker and perhaps broker successfully, assuming they can lobby other members of parliament to tell them how important their issues are.

I have had some experience in winning a few bills. I have also had some rather unsavoury experiences with losing a bill, and particularly one dealing with predatory pricing. The House of Commons is supreme, parliament is supreme and not a committee that from time to time has usurped its authority to simply erase the

bill because it did not happen to like it or because it was under particular instructions.

We all know that there are obligations on those committees. Ultimately, no committee as an adjunct or an arm of the House of Commons can assume a power which belongs to the House of Commons alone. It is for that reason that if we are going to treat private members' business seriously, when it goes to committee the role of committee must be to improve that bill, not extinguish it, not destroy it, not vandalize it and not remove it from existence.

I am speaking to the idea that bills that are votable must be treated with great respect. It has been a determination of the House that they be treated in such a way. I ask for the indulgence of members and the House leaders to consider that. If they truly want to make the role of members of parliament that much more relevant, that I believe is one area that we must work much harder on.

More important, I appreciate the role of the House leader of this party. I appreciate the role of the members who have had plenty of experience in the House and, yes, our new members who bring a very new perspective to what Canadians are saying to the House of Commons. It is equally important for us as members of parliament to be able to talk to members of parliament of the Conservative Party, the Alliance Party, the Bloc Québécois and even other parties like the NDP.

[*Translation*]

In this context, it is important we have hope, pride and confidence in members so they set partisan politics aside for a while and ensure we are here to promote the interest of Canadians and that we work toward that end.

I think it is clear that partisanship has a lot to do with the effective operation of this House, but perhaps as well can on occasion be a threat of confidence in this House. That is why I implore members, and hope to have their support, to show today in this debate that we can work together for the good of our country, to ensure our country is running well and to offer it a better future.

[*English*]

If we do nothing more than work together on the very valuable proposals that are being put forward individually by members of parliament, irrespective of their partisan affiliation, we will have accomplished in this parliament what no other parliament has done before.

Wracked by the internal internecine fights of "we have got to make the point, we have to embarrass the government, the government has to protect itself," I believe we have an opportunity which begins here this evening at ten to ten eastern standard time, to provide Canadians an opportunity to understand that what we do here is meaningful and important.

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Many times we will see Americans and people from other countries come into this famous House of Commons. They will find it fascinating that less than two sword lengths apart people every day, day in and day out, can see the most important issues of the day debated. Some people call it a farce and some call it theatre.

• (2150)

We have an obligation to explain to Canadians what we are doing here, but to also let Canadians know that we have the opportunity and an advantage here this evening to do what no other parliament has done before.

While there is only ten minutes for discussion in what is otherwise a very worthwhile evening, there are issues of the Board of Internal Economy and perhaps opening that up to members of parliament, making decisions to members of parliament and to make sure their needs are truly met. These are all part and parcel of the much wider question of how we continue to reinvent ourselves and modernize ourselves.

I compliment the government and the House leaders for having the courage to go and visit this debate. We need to deal with substantive issues. Let us work together to make this parliament relevant and in so doing we will have honoured all Canadians.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton Southwest, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated the member opposite's speech. I thought it was very well done.

In terms of the certain issue of private members' bill, as a member I fully concur that private members' bills should all be votable. It simply does not make sense to have two-thirds of the private members' bills that come up for debate for an hour not votable and then they are off the order paper. That does not make sense. I fully support the member in that.

I would also agree with him that it makes members more responsible. If they introduce a private members' bill that does not make sense, they will be the ones who are held accountable.

I would like to ask the member two questions. First, should the House extend the hours for debate of private members' bills? If we look at the parliament of Canada, for about the first 50 years we had more time devoted toward private members' business. Since about 1911 we have tended to move toward more government business.

The second question is a genuine question for the member opposite. In my short time here I have observed him and take him to be an intelligent and independent member of the House. The fact is we are hampered by a concentration of power in the Prime Minister's office and the Privy Council Office. That hurts those intelligent and independent members like himself.

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There was a conference last year in Edmonton that was co-sponsored by the previous member for Edmonton Southwest and the member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough. A member there said that all that we needed was for the opposition parties to join with a few backbench government members to say to the executive that they were not going to tolerate the control they had over parliament. He called it a backbenchers' bill of rights.

Would it be possible for the backbench government members to join opposition members and take back the rights from the executive that all parliamentarians should have, and should we do it right now?

Mr. Dan McTeague: Mr. Speaker, we are definitely challenged by the tenacity and the acuity of new members of parliament who seem to be very much on the ball, even at 38. I have to apologize, I have grey hair now but I did not eight years ago. The hon. member from Edmonton Southwest may know that in a couple of months. Perhaps if he spends a bit of time as a backbencher he will know what I am talking about.

To answer his first question, there is no doubt the hours should be extended. I think there is common perspective on the notion of extending the hours of debate in the House of Commons to accommodate private members' business. Perhaps one of those could be to devote the entire Friday to that end. That would be important as long as the condition was that private members' business was votable and that it would be taken more seriously, so that more members of parliament would come to the House and participate in those debates. That time should not be extended on non-votable bills because we basically talk out those bills.

His second question is even more important. I agree with him, as have many academics and many others who have observed this since about the time of Pearson and Trudeau. We have seen an accretion of power to the centre. There are a number of reasons for it including globalization and separation. Also, the media has changed. Rather than looking for information in the post-Watergate period, it has looked for the scandal. We have certainly seen that in the past few days, and the member is not unaware of that.

Would I agree to the notion that members of parliament can take back the House of Commons? They can do it at any time.

I think it takes the collective will of members on both sides of the House to work together on issues and principles, as long as they can agree that there is a place and a time for partisanship.

● (2155)

I refer to that in my few comments because the House tends to be so rife with division based on party lines. We tend to have an us versus them mentality. That is the very thing we have to try to get

around if we are going to go to the question of whether we can restore the sovereignty of the House of Commons.

The Speaker: The member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough; a brief question.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the hon. member for Pickering—Ajax—Uxbridge. I know he brings an extraordinary ability to identify important humanitarian non-partisan issues. I have great respect for the work he does in this place.

I have a question along the same lines as the member from Edmonton. I know this particular member has participated in recent hearings on the impartiality of commissioners and individuals who are to serve the House and serve the Canadian public with an arm's length relationship.

Should we be looking at how the financial strings which are attached to cabinet might influence its decisions? What I am referring to is protection for the officers like the auditor general, the privacy commissioner and the ethics counsellor. Should we be looking in some way to distance the resources that are made available to them through the treasury board and cabinet? Maybe we should be tying it more to parliament.

While we are on the subject, should we not have an independent, arm's length ethics counsellor to report directly to parliament? I know the member has followed this issue. Would it not increase public understanding and public—

The Speaker: I did ask the hon. member for a short question. We are now going to have a short response from the hon. member for Pickering—Ajax—Uxbridge.

Mr. Dan McTeague: Mr. Speaker, I know you want to hear a yes as an answer. I agree with and respect the hon. member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough.

There is no doubt that in order to allow the House to function, those who serve it must also be seen as being able to discharge their function in a way that is at arm's length and in a way that is above reproach. I think this is something that Canadians can trust as being part and parcel of the importance of our institution, which is to ensure that its officers function day in and day out in a way that ensures the level of confidence we have in our institutions, beyond the function of the members of parliament. Everything must be done and seen to be done to do just that.

Very briefly, we need to do this with respect to officers who may have worked within various ministries, portfolios and departments to ensure there is a cooling off period and to ensure that Canadians have that accountability and that trust.

Mr. John Williams (St. Albert, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I am certainly pleased to participate in this debate on parliamentary reform. It has been something that has been near and dear to my heart for a number of years.

When I first came to parliament, the 35th parliament from 1993 to 1997, I worked on a subcommittee chaired by what is now the government whip. We produced a report that is called "Business of Supply: Completing the Circle of Control", which was called by the clerk of the House of Commons at that time one of the best reports in 50 years on reforming the House of Commons. It was unanimously adopted by all parties.

It was tabled in the House of Commons. We did not get a response before the election was called in 1997, so we retabled it in the 36th parliament. Even though it had all-party agreement, the government said that there was nothing in it that it wanted to adopt. That is why we are frustrated when it comes to parliamentary reform. I will give some examples of what we are talking about.

The procedure to handle the estimates is a process by which the House approves the estimates and grants the government's supply money to pay the bills of the government. Last night we approved billions of dollars in 30 seconds flat. It is a crying shame. There was no debate, just a pro forma, first reading, second reading, committee of the whole, shall this clause carry on division, shall this clause and this clause, shall it be reported back to the Chair, all in favour, yeas and nays and it was a done deal. We approved \$16 billion that fast, without any examination. That cannot be.

• (2200)

If we are to have a parliament that will hold the government to account, we need a real process to handle the approval of supply.

Mr. Speaker, you are one of the more learned members on the issue of supply. For the edification of all Canadians, there is a simple process. If a motion is being debated, it can be amended. When an amendment is moved, we vote on it. If the amendment carries, the motion is amended. A vote is then taken on the main motion. When it comes to the estimates, the process is reversed.

If I put a motion on the order paper to reduce an expenditure by \$100, \$1,000, \$1 million or to eliminate the expenditure entirely, that causes the President of the Treasury Board to reaffirm what she wants to spend. Her motion comes up before mine. After she reaffirms what she wants to spend, how can she say it is impossible to vote against my motion when she has just reaffirmed what she wants to spend? It would be ludicrous to say one thing and then say the opposite. The system is fixed to ensure the government gets its way. This cannot be. That is why we are totally frustrated with the process of the estimates.

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In 1996 we talked about such things as evaluation. I complimented the President of the Treasury Board when she introduced a new policy on evaluation a month ago. It is along those lines that we have been talking about.

The government will spend \$170 billion this coming year but most parliamentarians do not know what it will be spent on. It spends this money through programs. Since 1996, I have been asking that programs be evaluated by asking simple fundamental questions, such as what is the program for and what public policy is this program designed to address. If there is a need for it, fine, but we should be told what it is.

Once we have figured out what the program is trying to do, the second question would be quite simple: How well is it doing it? We could then measure the success of the program. The next questions could be: Are we doing it efficiently, and can we achieve the same results in a better and more efficient way?

Let me take for example the program that the Minister of Finance introduced just before the election. I am talking about the heating fuel rebate which was paid out to prisoners, people in graveyards and so on. He said that the government would help low income people with their heating fuel bills. That is fine. There is nothing wrong with that. However, he did not tell us the methodology he would use to send out the \$125 cheques.

As it turned out, people who live in apartments and do not pay heating fuel bills received cheques. People in prison got cheques even though they do not pay heating fuel bills. People who recently died received cheques. They are in a graveyard and cannot cash it. The money will go to the estate even though the estate does not pay a heating fuel bill. It goes on and on. My son who lives with me received his cheque and he does not pay a heating fuel bill either.

What was the public policy? The public policy was to help low income people with their fuel bills. That is okay. How well did the program achieve that objective? As we can see, there was gross waste in the program by virtue of the fact that far too many people received a cheque even though they did not pay a heating fuel bill.

In 2001, five years after the business of supply report was brought down, the government said there was nothing in the report that was worth adopting. It finally slipped in the idea that maybe program evaluation was not such a bad thing after all, that it might be able to do a little pilot project to see if it could get the thing moving forward. Why did it take five years? That is the point.

• (2205)

On reallocation of funds we have heard about March madness: the money has to be spent before the end of the fiscal year because if it is not spent it will not be there for the next year. Empires will get smaller. There will not be a big raise. There will be staff reductions and maybe even transfers to different departments.

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Yesterday at the public accounts meeting we were dealing with the billion dollar boondoggle in HRDC. It is still hanging around. The auditor general had a chart that was the perfect chart for March madness. It showed that \$5 million to \$8 million a month was the average expenditure, and then in the month of March it went right up to \$50 million. In April it went down to some \$5 million to \$7 million. That went on for a whole year. It came to March of the following year and it went up again to \$50 million and back down to some \$5 million to \$7 million. It multiplies by 10 in the month of March. Is that March madness?

We are saying that we should have the capacity to move money from one budget to another. What does the government say? It says it cannot have that, that it would never do and that it would upset the protocol of budgets and so on. I cannot understand why the government cannot see the sense in money being transferred from one budget to another in this modern day and age of computers, budgets, accountants, financial statements and all these things.

We deal with another situation in public accounts. This is how ludicrous it was. The Department of National Defence has a budget to repair houses and it has a budget for new houses. It needed some new houses but there was no money for new houses. It still had some money in the repair budget. It would demolish wrecks of houses but keep one little corner of the basement so that it could build a new house on that corner of the basement and call it a repair. It was a brand new house.

When we talk about statutory expenditures, it is \$100 billion a year that does not even get debated in the House. Let the taxpayers know that \$100 billion never gets debated but it is spent, and that has to change.

The auditor general talked about the child tax credit. It is an actual expenditure but it gets netted off on taxes and does not show on the books. Loan guarantees do not show up until they are bad. Once they are bad, what can be done? There should be a process by which we can evaluate loan guarantees. I would love to go on for an hour but I know my time has ended.

Mr. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Ajax—Uxbridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a very simple question for the member for St. Albert. I heard him talk about things that I know are near and dear to his heart such as expenditures for the country. I compliment him for his work on the public accounts as chairman there. It is one of the only examples where there is an opposition chair. This should be extended to other committees.

I was quite amazed that on the subject of parliamentary reform he could not see the obvious in his own personage in terms of being the chair of that committee.

I take some exception to the member's comments about home heating fuel. I found them passing strange in that the premier of his

province had shown wisdom by extending a rebate to his people, as did the federal government, particularly those who are very poor. He talked about the boondoggles and concerns of individuals with respect to the money being poorly spent. Yet tens of millions have been spent properly for Canadians to help alleviate what was arguably one of the coldest winters, certainly in eastern Canada.

In the one or two minutes he has left, is he prepared to talk about the subject of parliamentary reform, particularly in the context of his knowledge with respect to whether we should have a few more chairmen from the opposition chairing committees?

• (2210)

Mr. John Williams: Why stop at a few, Mr. Speaker? We could have all the committees chaired by the opposition. There is no reason they cannot be. We are advocating a secret ballot, so that could quite easily happen. There is nothing wrong with that. Is there anything wrong with a parliamentary committee being chaired by the opposition?

Some hon. members: No.

Mr. John Williams: Even the Liberals are agreeing that we could have a secret ballot. He talked about the heating fuel rebate in the province of Alberta. The money was paid directly to the utility company who then took it off the bill. Those who did not get utility bills did not get any rebate.

The Minister of Finance said that anybody with a low income would get the rebate cheque. As I said, they are in the graveyards and in the prisons. They are living in rental accommodations or with their parents and they received the money.

Let us remember the four questions I asked. What is public policy? I did not disagree with public policy. The second question was about how well it was achieving that public policy. The heating fuel rebate is a disastrous waste of money because there was so much spillage over to people who did not pay utility bills. The third question was whether it was being done efficiently. Can we achieve the same results in a better way? These are simple questions.

If we were to have committee chairs from the opposition, perhaps we could have some real intelligent debates in committee where these things could come forward rather than being rammed through.

I remember Bill C-78, which was several hundred pages long. If I had not been there to try to filibuster the best I could, the whole bill would have been dealt with in 30 seconds flat. That is disgusting.

We are here to deliberate, to debate, to analyze, to assess and to check to see that legislation is valid and proper. The government would have taken 30 seconds in committee to deal with a 200 page bill which took \$30 billion out of the pension plan of the public

servants, the military, the RCMP and so on, money that had been set aside for their retirement. The Minister of Finance said that he needed the money to make his books look good and took it, with no ifs, ands or buts. There was no debate.

It cannot be that way. That is why we want parliamentary reform. Parliament is here to debate and to hold government accountable. If it cannot do its job, the government will be the worse off because of it.

Hon. Charles Caccia (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, because of the time limitation to which the hon. member for St. Albert has already alluded, I will very quickly put forward a proposal for consideration by the appropriate committee and then dive into the main issues that have emerged in the course of this afternoon and evening.

The rationale for the proposal I would like to put forward has to do with the fact that debates in parliament tend to be focused on pressing issues and controversies. They may be issues arising from legislation coming through the system, debates in question period, emerging debates, opposition days, et cetera. Rarely do parliamentarians get the opportunity to engage in debates addressing long term challenges, looking beyond the short term horizon.

The proposal I am putting forward is to allow for one evening debate per week on complex long term issues facing Canadians and perhaps the globe. The purpose of this exercise would be to make parliament more relevant, as it would extend its scope to analyze emerging issues, to examine future challenges and to articulate the public interest. Such debates would inform Canadians, would allow parliamentarians to tackle difficult issues and would allow for thinking outside the so-called box.

● (2215)

Such debates would not deal with issues currently on the legislative agenda, of course. They would likely not be subject to party discipline. They would allow for non-partisan debate in the House, constructive input by backbenchers at an early stage, and they would perhaps provide guidance for the executive.

The procedure would be simple. A committee of parliamentarians, one from each party, would review submissions of topics by colleagues in parliament and by the public, and they would decide the topic for debate. The topic would be presented in the form of a question in order to prompt debate about future trends and long term impact. CBC Radio does this frequently with a program on Sundays called *Cross Country Checkup*, an open mike program for listeners.

There are many examples of possible topics for discussion. They could include the price of medications, the impact of organizations, the relevance of economic indicators, regulating the Internet, modernization of the United Nations and the security council, Canada's role in peacekeeping, the electoral system, the impact of

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changing demographics in Canada, the aging population and our social services, and the demand and supply of the energy market.

Daylight savings time could be debated. Food safety is very topical, as is sustaining our forests and fisheries. We could debate setting limits to economic growth. We could look at trends in consumerism or the pace of technological change. The speed of political change would be a fascinating topic to debate, namely the race between the turtle and the hare. We could examine things from reproductive technologies to genetic engineering and the difficulties of the political system to catch up with the speed of technological change.

We could have a debate on social cohesion in Canada, on interprovincial trade, public transit, civil society, members of parliament's salaries if that is the wish, federal-provincial relations, the concentration of power in the media, and so on and so forth. These are possible topics for consideration by the appropriate committee.

Diving into the heart of the debate, which is quite interesting, I agree with a number of observations made by previous speakers, although time does not allow me to be more specific. Following the member from Prince Albert, I will say that in order to engage in thorough debate, particularly of estimates, we would need to look at our own calendar. Examining expenditures at length and in depth used to be the rule in the House until the late 1960s.

We would also need to change our patterns of attendance in Ottawa and probably delete a number of the weeks we are currently able to spend in our respective ridings. We would not be able to do some of the things that have been suggested this evening without changing our calendar.

Moving on to what has been said by those who want free votes and who have expressed frustration, and this seems to have been overlooked this afternoon and this evening, we operate in a party system. We are not a municipal council where it is every man for himself and where each person can vote and develop policy on the fly, so to speak. We have party conventions, we have a party program at every election, we have party associations, we have party caucuses, we have a party leader and there is consistency of policy in that respect. Therefore the vote is determined by our party affiliation.

● (2220)

That explains why there is party discipline. It explains why we have a party whip. Sometimes we vote in a manner that we would not do if we were freewheeling on a municipal council. That is very true. However let me add that we can vote against the government if we are on the government side.

We can vote against our party leader if we are on the opposition side, if we see fit to do so. It is not a pleasant experience, or something one lives with easily afterwards. However it can be

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done, it has been done and it will be done. That does not mean the system is bad. It is a party system. It is not a municipal council. The system requires discipline to move ahead and get things done.

I am sure every member of the opposition tonight, if they were on this side of the House and we were on the other side, would come to the same conclusion. There must be discipline, particularly on the part of members of the party in power, in order to move ahead and to govern.

Under Standing Order 108(2), committees can be the creators of very interesting reports. Time does not permit me to provide the titles of all of them. A report 20 years ago titled "Equality Now" was a great success. Very recently there was one on pesticides. If there is good will it is possible for a committee to determine a topic and produce reports which, if timely, can influence the course of action of governments.

The member for Winnipeg—Transcona made a number of very interesting points. One of them, which I remember clearly, is that he urged the House to introduce a measure whereby we would debate the ratification of treaties. He is right. We must do that. That is a shortcoming that needs to be corrected. He made a number of observations about which I would love to comment in a positive sense, but time does not permit me.

It is extremely important that we not lose sight of the role of the committee in charge of statutory instruments. It now has a different name but it nevertheless looks at regulations as they are drawn from legislation that is passed by parliament. It is an extremely important committee because a tremendous amount of power is inherent in regulations when they are written and that very often escapes the attention of parliamentarians. The regulations sometimes run in a direction that is not the one intended by the legislation from which they are drawn.

It is important for us, if we are interested in the exercise of power, to ensure that committee is properly equipped, properly staffed and that it has the resources necessary to examine the regulation. The same applies for public accounts.

Someone else has already mentioned the importance of allowing Canadians to see the candidates for the election of the Speaker. I support that idea fully.

I will conclude with the golden rule, which is this. It is for my party, since we are in power. In changing the rules of the House we should not adopt any rule or measure with which we would be uncomfortable and of which we would be critical one day when we might be, perish the thought, in opposition.

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member for Davenport said he did not have the time to be as

positive as he would have liked about some of the things I had to say. I was tempted to get up and give him the time by asking him to continue but I did not want to be that self-serving.

The hon. member did speak properly about some of the committees that have had a great deal of influence over the years. He referred to the committee "Equality Now", which was a special committee of the House. At the time to which he is referring there were a number of special committees of the House. There were committees on equality, on the disabled and on federal-provincial fiscal arrangements. I think there was one on trade. A number of special committees were struck for specific purposes. They had limited membership and they produced, not all of them but a lot of them, reports that became the basis for later policy decisions and policy development.

• (2225)

I want to reinforce the point the member made because I remember being on one such committee myself. They were called parliamentary task forces in the early 1980s. I was on the one for federal-provincial fiscal arrangements in 1981 which, in trying to deal with some of the federal-provincial disputes over the enforcement of the Medical Care Act, really laid the basis for what later became the Canada Health Act.

Another committee which did a lot of good work, and which the member and I served on, was the Special Committee on Acid Rain. The member may have mentioned it in his speech. If he did, I missed it because I did not hear everything he had to say.

If the member would like more time to reflect on the good committee experiences of which he has been part, many of which were good because he was part of them, then I afford him the opportunity by inviting him to do so.

Hon. Charles Caccia: Mr. Speaker, we are running the danger here of becoming a mutual admiration society. I can only say that I appreciate the additions the hon. member for Winnipeg-Transcona has made. Yes, he is quite right, the acid rain committee is one that I failed to mention.

In the Trudeau era a number of innovative ideas were introduced. Let the blossoms bloom was the spirit of the time. There was a tremendous amount of parliamentary activity, and that could be with us in this century, in this decade. There is no doubt that the talents are in this House to permit the flourishing of another crop of good initiatives, be they through the standing committee or through special committees. There is not a fixed route.

The important thing is to know that under the rules we have, and perhaps by improving them, by moving them into the 21st century and modernizing them, if you like, or reforming them, to use a term the member for Winnipeg-Transcona used in his speech this

afternoon, we could move toward a very productive parliamentary period in which we could eliminate the existing malaise and frustration. We could do so as long as we remember that we operate under a party system.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire (Longueuil, BQ): Mr. Speaker, despite the late hour, I will try to keep your attention on the debate on Motion No. 3, which reads as follows:

That a special committee of the House be appointed to consider and make recommendations on the modernization and improvement of the procedures of the House of Commons.

There are a number of reasons why I find this debate important and interesting. First, at a time when polls show that a majority of the public believe parliament is operating with great difficulty and that people are not pleased with how parliamentary business is being conducted, we, as parliamentarians, must ask ourselves about the current and future effectiveness of parliament.

The reason this debate is so important is that the public sees parliament as a place of confrontation, rather than a forum where its voice must be heard.

As we know, the outside world sees us as voting machines. People feel that the government does as it pleases, that it imposes the party line when things are too controversial. This, of course, generates frustration not only among members of parliament, but also among our fellow citizens.

• (2230)

We must always keep in mind two terms that are found in the motion, modernization and improvement.

The term modernization means to organize so as to meet current needs, and the needs that we must meet are those of our fellow citizens.

As for the term improvement, it means to make things better and more satisfactory. Again, I believe it is our fellow citizens, not the opposition or the government, who must be satisfied.

Any recommendation for modernization or improvement must, in my opinion, always be made in the best interests of our fellow citizens, so that their voices can be heard through us here in this House.

That said, in recent years there have been a number of reforms. The purpose of some of them was to increase the power of the government to govern more effectively, and very often this was at the expense of the ordinary MPs and watered down their powers.

The outcome of all these reforms was that, while they indeed speeded up the legislative work of parliament, they considerably reduced the ability of members of parliament to make a personal

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contribution. Examples of this are the reduction in time allocated for private members' business, the increased use of time allocation motions, and the time restrictions in question period.

Today we need to look at what the government has in mind with this parliamentary reform.

In my opinion, what is desirable is to maintain the balance between the government and the opposition parties, the balance between the government's right to govern and the right of the opposition to oppose it.

The objective of the reform should be to enable the entire body of MPs to perform their duties rapidly and effectively, and to truly play their role as legislators. Our rules must guarantee freedom of debate and protect the rights of all parliamentarians.

Unfortunately, the philosophy of the current government tends toward reducing more and more the role of parliamentarians, the ordinary MPs.

The time allocation motions imposed by the Liberal government are clear evidence of its guillotine philosophy, and this is contributing to the decline of the legislative role played by MPs.

When the Liberals formed the opposition during the Mulroney era, they were fiercely opposed to the government's habit of using time allocation, and they spoke out against its abuse of power and affront to parliamentary democracy.

Furthermore, this was what was behind the Liberal party's promise, made in its 1993 red book, to give political parties a greater opportunity to criticize government bills.

At the time, the Liberals spoke about restoring parliamentary integrity by governing with integrity. The red book said, and I quote:

In the House of Commons, a Liberal government will give MPs a greater role in drafting legislation—

For the information of the House and of members of the public listening this evening, it was in this same section of the red book that the Liberals promised to appoint an independent ethics counsellor. We know what happened. They voted against their own promise. It is this kind of attitude, this rigid party line, that is causing citizens to lose interest in what we do.

With respect to time allocation motions, this measure which was supposed to be the exception has now become the rule. Since coming to power, the Liberals have not changed the way things are done one bit. On the contrary, the situation has become worse.

Since time allocation was added to the standing orders, and despite its strong opposition to it during the Progressive Conservatives' term of office, the Liberal government is the government that has used it the most.

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Here, now, in greater detail are certain recommendations I wish to make to the committee.

My first recommendation concerns time allocation motions. I have spoken of them, of course, but I stress the point, because they must be used as a last resort, not just after a few hours' debate and, most important, the Chair must intervene more to prevent the government from making excessive use of them.

My second recommendation concerns the electronic vote. It is, in my opinion, high time it was considered. Of course, the votes have to be taken here in this House according to the will of members of parliament, who will want votes to be taken by recorded division in some instances.

My third recommendation concerns electronic petitions, which we must consider too. In fact, we must remember that we are living in a modern world and that parliament must reflect this fact.

• (2235)

A fourth recommendation concerns private members' bills. Despite what I heard from the government House leader a little earlier, they should all be votable, as should the motions for emergency debates.

Finally, it would be a good idea to amend the schedule of House proceedings so that routine proceedings occurs always at the opening of the sitting.

The success of parliamentary reform lies in the political will of the government to improve things. However, reforms of the past have taught us that, as a general rule, the government is much more inclined to make changes favourable to it and ones that do not limit its ability to act.

What is the point of advocating reform of parliamentary procedure if there is no political will to adopt it? What is the point of advocating reform of parliamentary procedure if the government opposes any change that will put it at a disadvantage? What is the point of advocating reform of parliamentary procedure if the Liberal majority is not prepared to do without the procedural tools that give it so much latitude?

In conclusion, parliament must be modern, open and more democratic. While the majority prevails, the minority must be given the right to oppose and to express.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the debate concerning the new committee on modernization of parliament or, as some would refer to it, reform of parliament. I had the opportunity earlier to participate to some extent through questions and comments, but I want to take this opportunity to better frame a particular area, that being private members' business.

As a member of parliament since 1993, one of the things that really is very clear to me, and I suspect to most members, is that listening to speeches is okay, but the questions and comments, whether it be in the House or at committees, provide the most stimulating activity for members of parliament.

I am also aware that in parliamentary tradition it is inappropriate for a member of parliament to actually read a speech. How many times have we seen the top of a member's head as he or she continues to read a speech? I am aware that members can certainly refer to notes where they are quoting or where there perhaps was some detail that would be appropriate to ensure accuracy on the record.

However, the following are the types of things I have heard through this debate today. Members are seeking out ways to ensure that the quality of debate in the House is improved, to ensure that opportunities for members to participate are improved and to ensure that we are making the best use of our time. I know most members would admit that there is not enough time to do all the work that we really would like to do and are asked to do.

As I only have 10 minutes to speak—and I do appreciate the opportunity—I would like to move on to private members' business, which to me represents an important opportunity for back-bench members of parliament to express themselves in terms of the quality of their thinking and in terms of their opportunities to advance issues and possibly even effect legislation.

Since 1993 when I was elected, private members' business has been an important aspect of my work. I have had the opportunity to present to the House some 20 or 25 private members' bills or motions. That has allowed me to get very familiar with the process we must go through. Quite frankly, I believe we can do better.

Most members know that the process of a lottery and going through a committee that has deliberations in camera to determine votability means that the possibility of a private member's item getting through, whether it be a bill or a motion, is actually quite limited.

On top of that, in my experience there have been other things that have concerned me. For instance, at one time there was a substantial amount of concern about the stretching of the resources available to members for research purposes. Yet it was also disclosed at the same time that the research personnel and the legal people were being asked to do a lot of work on proposed bills by members, and a large number of these bills were never introduced in the House.

• (2240)

The cost of that is very exceptional in terms of monetary value, but it is also significant in terms of utilizing resources that other members could make use of. I would hope that the committee

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would address the issue of the drafting of bills, the utilizing of resources and the commitments that members make to follow through and at least introduce those bills.

I also raise it because of another incident that happened to me. An opportunity to reintroduce in the 36th parliament a matter I had before the 35th parliament was denied to me because another member had put that item in before I did. When we carry that to its logical extension, we can see that it would be very easy for a particular member to put in dozens of bills on issues which possibly were not his or her own. The fact that the member submitted them for drafting purposes means that all other members would be restricted from having a same or similar bill.

That seems to be a pre-emptive move on behalf of members, to not only be able to take another member's issue away from him, but also to restrict other members from being able to do a very good job on an issue that another member has no intention of ever bringing through. That problem has to be dealt with.

There is the issue of being in the House of Commons, whether it be on a Monday morning or after government orders on Tuesday through Friday, for private members' business. Members know that speakers for private members' business are generally arranged in advance, although they do follow a party distribution for speakers. However, other members who have House duty and who must be here have no recourse but to sit on their hands and listen to debate by other members on issues which may be of interest to them. They cannot say anything. They cannot rise on questions or comments. All they can do is listen.

It seems like a contradiction in terms to say that we call that debate in this place when in fact debate is not really taking place. It is a linear situation. Debate in this place should be interactive.

Earlier today I asked a question of the member for Winnipeg—Transcona. I am not as learned as he is on some of the issues and I gave it my best shot. He answered with a couple of things that I thought maybe indicated a small misunderstanding of my question or my intent, but I did not have an opportunity to rebut.

The question is whether members in committee find that the questions and comments of witnesses, or among committee members when dealing with committee in camera business, are more effective or constructive when there is more than one question, more than one comment and an opportunity for rebuttal? Today I would have appreciated an opportunity to come back with a second question or a rebuttal statement to the issues. Maybe, just maybe, we should consider whether or not we are going to reinstitute debate in this place. By debate I do not mean speeches that people have not read beforehand because they have been provided by someone else, but debate where people have an opportunity for rebuttal and debate where we respect people's time by not being redundant in the speeches. That could go a long way.

The final item regarding private members' business that I would like to remind the committee of, because this is my opportunity to have input, is that there are on the order paper now about 140 private members' bills. Many of those bills are on the order paper on behalf of a member of parliament and that member of parliament has no possibility of having all of those bills dealt with in the current session or in this parliament.

● (2245)

It is sensible to me that there should be some reasonable limit on the number of items that members could put on the table unless they are prepared to withdraw something to put something else on. If members come up with 100 bills so that they can include in a piece of literature that they introduced that many bills at first reading, I am not sure whether or not it is a good utilization of the resources of the House or good utilization of a member's time.

With regard to private members' business and as part of parliamentary reform, we are looking at trying to improve the ability of all members of parliament to participate in a variety of ways to make good use of their time. We are looking at ways to give them ample opportunity to express their views and to allow them to leave their fingerprints on this place. We all know that this is not a forever position. I am somewhat concerned about other issues that I will not have time to get into, but this is a good starting point.

I have heard a lot of talk about reform with regard to the standing orders. The government House leader raised some issues which the committee will have a opportunity to come to consensus on. If this is a successful venture, it may be the starting point for more expansive reform which all members of parliament would support.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, I commend the hon. member on his remarks. I know he has been very active in the debate and follows it with a great deal of interest and sincerity.

My question to him is with respect to private members' business. He spoke of a system where members might be free to remove certain bills. Would he also like to see a system where members might be free to exchange bills between one another if the occasion arose?

Something that has been broadly discussed throughout the evening is having all private member's bills deemed votable so that there would be an expression of the entire House when the bills came before us. This would attach some particular significance to bills. Would the hon. member comment on that?

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Speaker, I agree with the first item my colleague raised. I would also like to respond to his question about making all bills votable.

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I had a conversation earlier with the leader of his party about good faith. We talked about all hon. members wanting to do good things. If we presume that members are here in good faith to do a good job, it would be easy to accept all matters as being votable. However our recent history shows that when things go wrong or get a little tight, people look for ways to be disruptive or to delay issues, et cetera. I agree with the member for Winnipeg—Transcona that delay is part of the democratic process.

The member's presumption would have to be that members would not abuse the opportunity and would not be frivolous in bringing items forward. I would much prefer that private members' items would have to qualify under the existing and maybe even stricter basic criteria so that they would not be dealt with at all if they had been previously dealt with.

Right now many bills and motions come forward which are very close to being the same but are a bit different. People who draft legislation say that if they change a couple of words in a bill it can come forward. If the issue has been dealt with in the House already there are also ways to do that.

As a compromise, I suggest that if a member is prepared to go through whatever process is involved to get his or her bill before the House, is prepared to give his or her presentation on the merits of the bill and be subjected to scrutiny and questioning by members of the House, there could be a preliminary vote to determine whether the House has sufficient interest in the matter going any further.

• (2250)

That would deal with the problem of making everything votable. It would have to be three hours and the number of members on it would be restricted. There is an equal disincentive or negative if we have ten excellent bills before the committee but only five could be picked to be votable.

The member is quite right. The private members' issue has many opportunities. We can already do swapping. The House has done that in the past with consent. There are ways that can work but the problem areas to address have to do with efficiency, equity, fairness and transparency. Right now we do not meet all the tests.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak in favour of parliamentary and democratic reform. It is not the first time in the past six months that we have spoken to parliamentary reform. We have spoken about it a lot.

In the last general election we probably held close to 25 or 30 forums and public meetings where we spoke about issues such as agriculture, fiscal responsibility and judicial reform. More than anything else we spoke about parliamentary reform.

We spoke about the need to see certain reforms in the Senate. We want to see an equal Senate. We want to see a Senate that is

effective and is elected. We talked a great deal about that in the constituency of Crowfoot. We spoke about free votes. The member for Yellowhead so eloquently this evening showed us the need for free votes. I agree with his words. We spoke about referenda, about recall and about citizen initiatives. All these things are fundamental to the parliamentary reform we would like to see.

Tonight we come to the House to discuss parliamentary reform. We are talking about different minor things that can change in certain technical aspects of bringing bills forward. They are probably things that are very important. We are talking about using notes or not using notes. In the past two months I have been here I have heard a lot of people give speeches where they should have used notes.

However, I want to speak about parliamentary reform. There is a country that understands parliamentary reform, a country with a population of less than seven million, with very few natural resources. It has a harsh climate and 25% of its land mass is covered by mountains. It has four official languages, many ethnic subgroups, and large regional economic disparities.

One would think such a country would be riddled with economic and social strife, division and troubles, but nothing could be further from the truth. The country has had the highest standard of living of any other country over the last 50 years. Never has the country experienced more than 1.5% unemployment. Inflation is never higher than 4% and interest rates are always close to 6%. It has an extensive high quality health care, an excellent education system, generous social services which I might add are truly for the needy, and a social service program that looks after those who are handicapped and in need. The country has a world class transportation system.

In proportion to population the country has the smallest civil service in Europe, the lowest tax rates and the smallest national budget. Why does the country enjoy such economic and social success? It is because Switzerland has a recipe for success. The ingredient for success is called true democracy.

The Swiss truly have government of the people, by the people and for the people. Power is literally in the hands of the people, a concept that for far too long has escaped the imagination of those who sit in power here and run this country.

• (2255)

We in Canada have government of the politicians, by the politicians and for the politicians. It is time for change. We in Canada have top down rule. The tendency of this and previous governments has been to increase their own power by employing closed door policies. Only an exclusive few, the cabinet, the executive of government and those influenced by special interest groups and lobby groups, are the ones that come together to decide policies and programs in Canada.

Canadian citizens have effectively been excluded from participating in a forum that decides how their daily lives will be conducted and affected. Effective communication between citizens and their elected representatives has been cut off. Politicians are no longer accountable to the electorate on a day by day basis. Rather than thinking of gaining public confidence through listening and accommodating public concerns, elected officials have spent their time selling their government programs and legislation to the people.

We have seen that in the last week. We have seen farm groups and agricultural people who have come together to say that the programs the government has put forward are insufficient. The response of the government is to come out with hundreds of thousand dollar advertising campaigns selling their programs back to the people of Canada.

Rather than representing their constituents in Ottawa, our federally elected officials are representing Ottawa back home to their constituencies. My colleagues on this side of the House and I are committed to changing this sad fact.

We talked about throughout the last general election. We are committed to changing the autocratic means of decision making by restoring power to the rightful owners, the people. Individuals on the other side of the House are chuckling at the novel idea that we would actually give people power in terms of programs and representation.

Since my colleague speaking before me provided many recommendations on modernizing and improving the procedures of the House for the special committee to consider, I would like to briefly speak about an Alliance recommendation for improving democracy and it is recall. Recall, a procedure that allows the voters to call their representatives to account before the end of their term, is but one step in many to putting power back into the hands of the people.

I do not know of any other job in Canada that will not allow the removal of a person from the job for improper conduct or for not doing his or her job, except for the positions occupied by politicians. We on this side of the House believe the people of Canada should have the right to fire the people that they have hired.

As it stands now, elected officials cannot be fired by the very people who hired them, except at election time. This leaves the impression that politicians are above the rules and the regulations that govern the average Canadian worker. Allowing an elected official immunity for misconduct or incompetence is an absurdity that is added to the current level of political apathy as witnessed in the last federal election when only 51% of the electorate decided it was really worth coming out to vote. Author William Mishler says:

Political attitudes and behaviour are learned. The political apathy and inactivity characteristic of large segments of the Canadian public are not intrinsic to man's basic

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nature. They are neither inevitable nor immutable. The decision to participate in or abstain from politics is to a substantial degree a conditioned response to the political environment.

Our political system has bred the attitude that the government does not care what the people think or what the people want. Those elected to parliament have lost touch with the people. The political environment has produced a nation of cynics who hold politicians in contempt. Recall would force elected representatives to open the doors of communication with their constituents, thereby enhancing the dialogue between them, a dialogue that lies at the core of the representative process. Recall would also help restore mutual respect between the electorate and the politicians. It would put in place the cheques and balances to remove the monopoly of power held by parliament.

• (2300)

Representatives would be forced to vote on legislation according to the wishes of their constituents not according to party line. We saw some of that on legislation that was been highly contentious, such as same sex benefits and firearm laws.

The Swiss know that if democracy is to be meaningful, it has to be a bottom-up system of popular or grassroots government. The Swiss have had a system of initiative, referendum and recall since 1874. The value of this process is seen in the prosperity of the country.

The official opposition encourages the use of national referendums to give Canadians the opportunity to voice their opinions on issues of a moral or contentious nature. If all members of the House believed in democracy, if they truly believed that the majority ruled in this country, they too would support the use of national referendums. They would support the establishment of a special house committee, as recommended today.

We need to move forward in the House of Commons. We need to move forward in a positive way, where the people would feel that they had better representation, that when they sent their member to Ottawa or to parliament he or she would speak their wishes. We can do that through taking a very comprehensive look at what parliamentary reform means. I suggest that we have heard far too much of what it does not mean. It is time to look at changing a system that is sadly in need of repair.

Mr. Greg Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest, PC): Mr. Speaker, I was interested to hear the member's comments, especially when he spoke about this subject of recall. I am not sure what the member is thinking and how this would be triggered, because we have heard this before.

One of his own members, as we all know, got himself into some difficulty this week. That would be the member for Edmonton—Strathcona. What would trigger that recall back home, for example, in Edmonton—Strathcona?

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We might even take the example of the member for Edmonton North, who came into this House raging against pensions, then swallowed herself completely whole on that issue and is now a pensionable member of this House. She railed against it in the 1993 election, in the 1997 election and in the 2000 election, until she entered the House well after the election and completely reversed her position. Basically she has violated the very people who elected her.

I would say those people would be subject to recall, if I am listening to the member correctly. What are the rules of the game? The only thing I agree with is the best recall in the world is an election every four years, where people can measure over that four year period.

Then there is the cost to the voter. If the member is serious in what he is saying, two of his members should leave this Chamber almost immediately if an election were held back in the ridings today. Maybe Rick Mercer on *This House Has 22 Minutes* can do a better job on this issue than we could.

Remember the difficulty his own leader got himself into in the election on an ill-thought out plan, in terms of referendum.

This is a road that the populace have gone down for years.

In all fairness to all members, we have to measure over something more than a month or two months.

The other issue is that many of us come into this House elected with a good strong vote. It is what we call a plurality not a majority. For example, in the last election I won by something in the order of 6,000 votes. That was about 49% of the vote in my riding. It means, by definition, that 51% of the people back in my riding did not vote for me. That applies to at least 50% to 60% of the members in the House now with five and six parties running elected by plurality. Has the member really thought through this issue to its ultimate conclusion?

• (2305)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. I honestly knew that that one was coming.

I believe that when we have policy that it is policy we stand on in the good times and in the bad times. It is policy of which we can be proud. It is policy that brings what we would call, and what perhaps is not understood in the House, accountability to every to every member.

On this side we have a book that we like to term required reading. It is called *On the Take*. If the hon. member has not read it I would suggest he read it. It is excellent evening reading. In that book he will find countless examples in 1993 and before 1993. It

reminds me of Erik Nielsen and his many concerns with the old Progressive Conservative times. He absolutely felt betrayed. He felt that those people should step down and move aside.

We had another former leader from that party who got himself into some difficulty. I think he spoke to a judge at the time. There are examples on every side of the House. It would bring accountability back to this place. All parties need it.

I am quite proud of our referendum that the member was referring to. In areas of contentious debate, where issues have been brought forward, far too often we watched the Liberal government members stand up like puppets, look at their the Prime Minister and vote the way the he told them to vote. The people back home said that was not the reason that they sent their member to Ottawa. They sent the member to Ottawa to represent them.

There were people in the back rows on the government side with tears in their eyes who they voted for the gun law when they knew that their constituents were against it.

We have seen this so many countless times on all sides of the House. It is time we look at a policy that would bring accountability back to each member. I am proud to stand here and say that this party believes in accountability. We believe in recall. We look forward to parliamentary reform with some substance and not the meandering kind that we have seen brought forward here tonight.

Mr. Rick Laliberte (Churchill River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is certainly an honour to speak tonight.

I came to the House of Commons as a student. I was trying to understand how the country governed itself. The way I understood it was national sovereignty was before us. I must say the member for Davenport is a member of the party structure.

When I came in 1997, there was a speech by the then leader of the official opposition. He announced his intentions today to resign and move on. However he left a mark on me. He said that this place was like a vessel, and we had a captain that guided this vessel on its journey.

We have to look at national sovereignty and our place in this country as symbols. If we look at this vessel, it came from a British parliamentary structure. A depth of tradition came with this building. All these materials, structures and design came from an honourable and noble intent. It is to govern the people and their lands.

I bring with me here today two books. The first book is the entitled "League of the Iroquois Confederacy". I spoke earlier this week on this. It is very fortunate, Mr. Speaker, you are the one who was receiving the speech on Monday when I delivered it. This existed before this building.

• (2310)

The governance of this land is in these words. It is a story of the Iroquois confederacy on these shores. It tells the story of aboriginal people living in harmony among one another and debating issues of the day for their survival on the land.

The second book is the treaties that the crown of Britain wrote with the aboriginal people. All the numbered treaties are found in here. That is what made the sovereignty of Canada. These two stories created the story of our country. Today we have to debate today where are we taking our children with the wisdom of our elders, with the wisdom of our treasured homelands and our connection to the land? That is what makes our country.

We cannot create this out on the ocean. This is created because of the territories, what we call North America. It is called turtle island in many stories. I look at it as a river system. Look at the basin of the mighty St. Lawrence River system, the Churchill River and the Hudson Bay, the Mackenzie, the Fraser and the Yukon river systems. That is a vast tract of land. How do we govern it?

This is the big challenge we have before us in parliament. How do we capture the vision of a nation, identify its goals and implement them? This is our challenge as parliamentarians in this place and as parliamentarians in the other place, which we call the Senate. In my view, that is the house of elders. It plays a very honourable role in the tradition of the aboriginal people and in the tradition of the Westminster houses.

Then we have parliamentary structures and legislatures in the provinces, which came later. How we relate to them is very crucial. Last night the estimates were approved. A lot of the finances are given to the treasuries of the provinces. We enact them into the local and the municipal governments, the schools, health and the libraries. They are all connected.

This is what sustainable development is about. It is a belief that we can look at the resources, the land, the environment, the means, the food and the water of our people, our land and our nation. We balance it with our thoughts of the people, the culture, the knowledge, the wisdom and the languages. For many people all over the world Canada is their home.

Then there is the economy and money. I still cannot believe where money comes from sometimes. It is a means of transaction that exists today in the world. At some point in time there were beavers piled up at Hudson Bay stores, which were used to purchase muskets, food, lard and bacon. Today it is plastic cards in people's back pockets. These are used for transactions and commerce. Three-quarters of our laws are based on commerce.

The whole context of a remarkable civil organization is required. What do those three words mean? It means we left our mark here and we were civil. This is an organization. A degree of influence is

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expected of us by our constituents, the people that we speak for. We leave our marks in words and in gestures.

This whole challenge of restructure is a happy time. I witnessed candour here that is very seldom seen between the member for Winnipeg—Transcona, a very noble statesman, heaped in the history of the House, and the member for Davenport. The candour that took place between the two members is rarely seen in the House and it should be exemplified. We should have a sense of humour, we should have a sense of appreciation of what we are trying to do, and we should support each other for what we believe in.

Look at this building. It is square. We are meant to fight. They fight us, we fight them for this country. Why? We have cultures. I have French blood in me. I may also have English blood in me but I know I have Cree.

[Editor's Note: Member spoke in Cree]

• (2315)

[English]

As an aboriginal person, I see it in a different light as well. I see that we need to bring that strength from this journey. As this vessel continues, we need to bring all our peoples together. This is the time. This is the challenge.

The House of Commons, as we call it, is a place that represents every corner of Canada. Every person, every neighbourhood and every house should be represented here, every kitchen table. We bring our thoughts and our ideas here and then we have the ability to research. The parliamentary library is heaped with research materials. If we have an idea, a specific challenge or a question, people will guide us. In order us to make solid decisions we need the research service, the committee work that is done and the documentation.

I must thank the committee chairs who guided me in the previous parliament. They showed me that we can all work together for a common purpose and that we can challenge each other.

The work of the MP is unfinished. I would love to see a house of representation of this House. Let us say that the Saskatchewan legislature has 200 seats. Why could we not some day send representatives of our House to the Saskatchewan legislature, Quebec's national assembly or the Ontario legislature as Queen's Park in Toronto to debate the issues? Why could we not move around? This country is huge. We should not try to govern ourselves like an island like England. We are not an island that big. We are huge. We have to expand ourselves to the reality of this country. That is why I beg for restructuring.

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Let us look in a respectful way to a new relationship with each other. Maybe the library, as the sacred symbol of our unity, should be a third House. Maybe representatives of the original signatories of the treaties of the aboriginal nations should be allowed to sit in parliament and guide this country. Maybe they should hold the sacred responsibility of sustainable development in the future. While we would manage the affairs of the day to day issues, somebody would be taking care of the long term cycle of the breathing, living organism we call Mother Earth, and this country, Canada, is responsible for a big piece of Mother Earth. I challenge Canada to take that responsibility to heart.

I wish all parliamentarians well. I recognize all the people who have taken their seats here and the history that is heaped behind us. Let us not forget it as we challenge the future.

Mr. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a new member, I had not planned to speak tonight. I had planned to just listen to the wisdom of others. However my colleague brought in such new dimensions of interest that I would just like him to go on a bit further.

The advantage of our pluralistic society is that there are other systems that give us wisdom and knowledge. There is nothing to say that our system has everything right, and I think we can learn from that.

As a former president of Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, I was quite interested in the comments of my colleague. I would like him to elaborate on a couple of areas.

When the six first nations of Iroquois were originally warring among themselves and then they came together and organized a system of government, they often took longer to make decisions than we do today. It was a different form of decision making that could also have its benefits.

I wonder if the hon. member could comment on whether that system of government or the systems of government of other first nations in Canada, through the clan systems or through consensus decision making, may have some type of models that we may incorporate in some of the systems that we use here in the House of Commons.

• (2320)

Mr. Rick Laliberte: Mr. Speaker, at the outset I think I said I was a student. A study to understand the whole concept of structure and symbolism must be looked at by this committee. If we are going to strike a committee we must look at the basic structures and the purpose for those structures, such as why the House is designed this way. We have to look at those basic needs. We have a huge budget to renovate everything on this Hill, so we can afford to exercise exercise some wisdom and maybe some adventure.

I think the symbol of a circle is sacred. It is unity. The country needs unity in a big way. We have to unite our communities and unite the country for the sake of our future. This building is not designed for unity. It is designed to be adversarial. We are designed not to get along. We are two sword lengths away. We are like little kids who do not want to hurt themselves. We need to become a unified force.

The territorial legislature of the Yukon transferred a new design to the Northwest Territories and now Nunavut called the new territorial governance legislature. It designed a consensual form where everyone is elected with no party structure. The Yukon is a little different, but in the other two territories we all get elected as members representing our ridings and then we decide who will be the government and the executive. Maybe that is a challenge here. Maybe this executive that is elected here should be accountable to the majority of the House. Maybe that is where we should go.

However, we should look at the symbol of a circle. We have a sacred symbol in the parliamentary library. It survived the fire of 1916. Let us use it to keep the country together by putting it in its rightful place with the rightful history, from the Iroquois and all the nations of this country that existed here before. If we put things in their rightful place, we will have the right provisions in our vessel to make that journey into the millenniums to come.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Suzanne Tremblay (Rimouski—Neigette-et-la Mitis, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in spite of the somewhat late hour, I am pleased to take part in the debate on Motion No. 3, tabled by the government House leader. The purpose of this motion is to create a special committee of the House to consider and make recommendations on the modernization and improvement of the procedures of the House of Commons.

The motion deals, among other things, with the committee's membership and powers, the unanimous agreement of its members on the report to be submitted to the House, and its power to make recommendations. The motion also provides that the committee shall present its report no later than Friday, June 1, 2001.

From the outset, I want to insist on the terms modernization and improvement. I hope these two terms will have the same meaning for all committee members, otherwise the unanimity rule might prevent us from having a parliament that operates like a parliament should in the 21st century.

The Bloc Québécois believes that any change to the standing orders should be made for the purpose of improving a democracy that can always be improved. These changes must be based on principles designed to promote useful and constructive debates, in a flexible framework where democracy takes precedence over

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everything else, and where no one is the possessor of the absolute truth.

At last we can say what changes we would like to see to the standing orders that govern Canada's democratic life. We must face a new reality and organize our parliamentary business accordingly.

Canada has long had a biparty system. Sure, a third party would sometimes manage to make its way into the House of Commons, but the situation recently changed. Since the creation of the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party, which became the Canadian Alliance some months ago, regional Canada has made its way here. Opposition parties in the House of Commons have represented and continue to represent at least 60% of voters.

• (2325)

However, unfortunately, the course of parliamentary proceedings does not reflect this situation. In addition, it would appear that, for many members, something has to be done to save democracy largely compromised in the present context.

The changes sought must permit healthy debate and a constructive exchange of ideas in a flexible context where democracy holds sway.

In our parliamentary organization, the party winning the most seats forms the government and manages the affairs of state. The opposition, for its part, acts as watchdog to ensure public affairs are managed fairly and democratically.

The government majority should not use its plurality of seats to impose the initiatives it is proposing every time the opportunity arises.

Let us take the example of government bills. At second reading, each party expresses its opinion with respect to the bill under study and announces the broad lines of the changes it would like to make to the said bill. When the bill is referred to a standing committee for study, the members hear public officials and witnesses, if necessary, before proceeding to clause by clause study of the bill.

I must regretfully inform the House that this whole operation is, in most instances, totally useless. The debates are wasted. The amendments proposed are very rarely incorporated, although in many cases they would improve bills so they would benefit the greatest possible number of people.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the role of the opposition is to ensure that the legislation passed by parliament serves the public, and that the exercise of power by the government does not become a despotic tool for and by a minority.

There is no denying that, since my arrival in the House of Commons, amendments to the standing orders, along with the Liberal Party's way of doing things, are far from advancing the cause of democracy.

Time allocation motions pursuant to Standing Order 78, which are commonly referred to as gag orders, should be exceptional measures used as a last resort. It is good for parliamentarians to take the necessary time to discuss bills introduced in the House.

However the government does not want the media and the public to realize that a bill being debated poses a problem. So gag orders have become the norm and the government regularly invokes them, because people must be objective enough to recognize that, in fact, this is the main tool the government has for limiting debate and the opposition's right to speak.

Before putting a time allocation motion to a vote in the House of Commons, the Speaker should make sure that the motion does not constitute an abuse of House procedure. To help him reach a decision, the minister sponsoring a bill affected by a time allocation motion should come before the House and take part in a question and comment period not to exceed 60 minutes in length, in order to justify why the time allocation is worthwhile, if not actually necessary. It must be kept in mind that this government has made excessive use of this standing order since 1993, and the practice has become commonplace. The government majority ought not to fear such a measure.

It is regrettable that the government got Motion No. 2 passed this last February 27, for that motion is totally anti-democratic in character and gives the government effective control over the opposition. In fact, the government has given the Chair a power that is totally subjective, for it will henceforth be the one to decide on such things as whether an amendment is frivolous or too repetitive.

The opposition is therefore losing a basic tool for improving bills. Its ability to do so is reduced to a bare minimum. This motion muzzles the opposition parties and limits them to a flat and toothless debate.

• (2330)

Moving on to another issue, in the early summer of 2000, I had the opportunity to travel to the United States, along with the House leaders of the various political parties present in this House, to observe the organization of the electronic voting carried out in Washington and Boston, among other places. When I realize that electronic voting has been in use for more than 30 years by our neighbours to the south, I tell myself just how far behind we are.

The government House leader would have served democracy better if he had shown some up to date thinking and proposed a way of speeding up votes, instead of acting as a big bully with his Motion No. 2 with just one object: limiting the introduction of amendments.

The system in place in Boston keeps the significance of the vote and the responsibility of the politicians intact. It is even better than

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the system we use in the House when we want to speed up the voting process and ask our whips to rise and indicate how their party will vote. I do not doubt that, should electronic voting become a reality here, the Board of Internal Economy would ensure that such a system is absolutely reliable.

It is also important to preserve the unique character of opposition days by providing that the motion that is debated cannot be amended by the party that proposed it. Therefore, Standing Order 85 should be amended accordingly.

When the Speaker authorizes an emergency debate under Standing Order 52, the motion debated should always be voted on, for reasons of transparency and democracy.

If it is deemed that a debate must urgently be held, then it is appropriate that parliamentarians vote on that urgent matter. The debate would then have a much greater significance than it currently does. The criteria to help the Chair rule on the admissibility of such a request should be made more flexible to allow more of these debates.

No changes to the standing orders should result in a reduction of the time given to members of parliament when reviewing government bills at second and third reading.

The role of members of parliament is already quite watered down and must not be reduced even more with the introduction of measures that would allow, for example, the drafting of bills following the tabling of a petition.

There would be many other points to mention or discuss. But unfortunately my time is up. I do hope that this debate will have a happy ending, that it will lead to transparency and a greater desire to promote and increase the participation of elected members to the democratic life of our parliament.

[*English*]

Mr. Rick Laliberte (Churchill River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we see the technological change that is happening in our age. It is like what the hon. member said before about the hare and the turtle. There is the speed of the outside world while we are going as slow as molasses. However, we are taking sure steps on some careful decisions that we have to make here.

I ask the hon. member this: what vision does she see in terms of leaving a mark from this time on? We have our system of Houses, our parliamentary structure now. What should we leave behind to keep the country vital for future generations?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Suzanne Tremblay: Mr. Speaker, now there is an extremely interesting question. We have entered the 21st century, but we have brought all our old culture along with us.

Earlier, I heard the hon. member's speech, and I watched the opening of the new parliament in Nunavut on television. I realized that their culture and organization were completely different from ours.

I wonder to what extent we would be capable, for instance, of simply transforming this chamber into a semicircle. How would we justify such an action? We would certainly have to have a different vision of politics.

• (2335)

It is often said that there should perhaps be a different approach to politics, that the confrontation and violence should be reduced, and that we should work more for the common good. This certainly bears some thinking about. Although the committee does not have a lot of time, I hope we will be able to see evidence of this concern, and that we will be allowed to give careful thought to what we want to become as parliamentarians.

There is no doubt that each and every one of us was elected to represent the public. We belong to a political party but, once elected, our job is to represent all our constituents. The 301 members of parliament represent the 30 million people in Canada, without exception.

Obviously, a major change could be made by trying to come up with procedures that would allow us to work together, around a table, developing a bill for the betterment of our community, rather than having an authoritarian, majority government which thinks it has all the answers, which has its own way of looking at things, and which is completely insensitive to how opposition members might see them, even though we represent, this time around anyway, 60% of Canadian voters.

[*English*]

Mr. Chuck Cadman (Surrey North, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, it has been a long day, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this very important issue of parliamentary reform. It is the backbenchers who are most affected by the way this place has been operating in the past while.

The fact that we are debating this issue at all is, I believe, a strong indication of the frustration that we are facing in attempting to represent our constituents in this place.

In an effort to place my individual concerns on the record, I would like to take a few moments to outline how I have been personally affected by what has been going on over the past few years while I have had the fortune and the honour to represent the constituency of Surrey North.

A couple of years ago, in carrying out my parliamentary duties and my responsibilities, I was developing a number of amendments

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to a government bill. It was my understanding that I was working with the staff of the House of Commons in a confidential manner in an effort to bring forth proposed amendments and changes to a government initiative concerning its youth criminal justice law. I found it more than a little disconcerting to discover that the clerk of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights was in possession of my amendments prior to my submitting them to the committee for consideration.

I immediately embarked on a question of privilege in this place. To make a long story short, it appears that there had been a restructuring within the organization of the people whose considerable expertise and valuable assistance we rely on to do our jobs. I also note that after much debate and deliberation the Speaker at the time ruled that my privileges were not harmed by what had occurred.

The government side explained that the restructuring was necessary to enhance and promote the team concept of providing assistance to members of parliament. Let me be clear that I certainly do not question the Speaker's ruling, as he could only decide on the basis of the information that was provided to him at that time. I would be remiss if I did not add that there was subsequently quite an extensive debate and investigation by the procedural and House affairs committee into this operational change that had occurred without the consent or knowledge of the members.

I also note that while everyone involved in the decision making finally decided that nothing was wrong and the members of this place were not disadvantaged by the change, we have since reverted to our former status quo. In short, although it was decided that nothing was broken, we decided to fix it anyway. It is my understanding that now when I as a member employ legislative counsel to draft proposed amendments, those amendments will no longer be placed on a database for numerous employees to use and potentially abuse.

The listener may well question these comments. One could wonder, I suppose, just why I am raising the issue when everything is back to normal and the battle appears to have been won. My concern is that what should have been a fairly straightforward example of breach of confidentiality of lawyer-client privilege was never formally recognized as such. Politics had come into play. The government, the ultimate controller of the staff in this place, refused to accept that harm had occurred and refused to hold anyone accountable for that harm.

• (2340)

We had a manager within this institution who unilaterally changed the operation of the solicitor-client relationship between a member of parliament and House legal counsel. That person was able to avoid censure, and through the failure to properly address what happened, I wonder when something similar will again occur and which member of parliament will be on the receiving end of it.

I have had my turn, but I do not wish anyone else to be similarly affected.

As an aside, I should point out that my relations with the clerk of the justice committee at the time were somewhat negatively affected by that situation. It was my sense that he took the position that I was attacking him and trying to cause him some grief for having access to my confidential amendments. I assure members that nothing could have been further from the case. It was the system as it was set up within the legal department of the House of Commons that permitted, and for that matter required, the clerk to become involved as he did. The clerk was not responsible for that.

I would suggest that the standing orders include the concept of solicitor-client privilege to protect the information that passes between individual members of parliament and their assigned legal counsel. Members of parliament are entitled to an expectation of confidentiality with counsel in order to do their job, especially in the political environment that exists in this place.

Another concern I have and would like to discuss has to do with committee work. We hear time and time again about the importance of our committees in threshing out the problems and nuances of all forms of legislation before it comes up for a vote in the Chamber.

I take my committee duties seriously, as I am sure all members do. I am present at the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights quite regularly. I also understand the importance of presenting amendments through the committee so that its members are provided with the opportunity to review and debate those proposals. It is, after all, the committee members who are tasked by parliament to conduct indepth review and analysis of legislation through witness testimony, debate, proposing amendments, et cetera. The committee members gain a more thorough knowledge of the issues raised by the legislation and use that gained experience to assist the House with improving the legislation.

It is my opinion in the time that I have been here that some of the best work of the justice committee was accomplished during the time that the late Shaughnessy Cohen, rest her soul, occupied the chair. While we did not always agree, as I am sure members know, she was a most determined individual. I do believe that she always tried to do what was right and what was fair. The fact that the two parliamentary secretaries sat as members of the committee did not appear to intimidate Ms. Cohen. She took control of the committee's work.

Too often I can see that a committee chair can become intimidated by the presence of a parliamentary secretary. Too often I can see that the committee's work becomes a mere formality. It is the parliamentary secretary who gives the government members their marching orders on how to proceed and ensures that no one strays from the government's agenda.

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However, I understand that this particular issue will be discussed further by others and perhaps even in another venue; of course I am referring to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

My real concern over committee work relates to what happened during the last parliament with the Youth Criminal Justice Act, Bill C-3. The committee conducted an indepth, extensive review and heard from many witnesses. The committee members then presented a number of amendments, approximately 250 in all, of which about 150 came from the government itself. Instead of dealing with those amendments, the committee sent the bill back to the House unchanged.

To my mind, the committee failed the House, as it did not fulfil its function. It spent a large number of tax dollars to hear from witnesses. It occupied parliamentary staff and tied up government officials for months on an important piece of legislation, but in the end it essentially accomplished absolutely nothing. The House was deprived of the position on the bill from the very people it had tasked to review and return with their advice and experience.

Surely there is something wrong here. Surely it is more than an inconvenience. It is an abject failure. I fully appreciate that there was a filibuster of sorts going on in the committee but filibusters are nothing new in this place or in the committees. They are addressed one way or another. We do not run away from them. The government had the same type of majority on committee as it does in this Chamber. It had a number of ways in which it could have addressed that problem.

By abdicating its duties, the committee forced the reintroduction of all those amendments in this Chamber and we are all aware that the number of amendments then swelled, up into the neighbourhood of 3,000, which had to be addressed by all members of parliament. The actions of the committee made a bad situation worse.

When members of the official opposition, the Progressive Conservatives, the NDP and yes, even the government itself, lose their amendments in the shuffle, so to speak, it is an injustice. For the members of those parties to be denied the opportunity to debate those amendments with their peers in committee is also just not right.

• (2345)

At times I left with the distinct impression that work done in committees was merely a game or a sham. The government was going through the motions to make it appear as though legislation was thoroughly reviewed and analyzed. I regret feeling compelled to adopt this attitude, and that is why I wanted to speak to this important matter of parliamentary reform.

I implore all members to take a serious interest in improving the way we do things around here. We have been elected to represent Canadian citizens. At times the burden can become heavy, but we knew that or we certainly should have known it before coming here. There is much work to be done but we need the right tools to do the job properly. We need significant changes to our procedures to do just that.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, PC): Mr. Speaker, I commend the hon. member on his remarks. He brings a usual calm, deliberate approach to the debate. He has made a number of graphic illustrations on how things have gone on a dysfunctional track in many instances.

My question to the hon. member is about debate in the House in terms of how we might improve the way we interact with one another. We have had a number of occasions where we have looked to the Speaker to be more interventionist and to act a bit more like a referee if rules are being flouted, if closure is being invoked too soon, or if omnibus legislation is deemed to be improper. We have seen the theatre of the absurd in question period with members of the government not answering questions.

When somebody is asked a direct question, particularly in debate where members tend to interact on a more one to one basis, sometimes the question is asked for partisan reasons but there is a point behind it. The question is asked to illustrate something that is perhaps difficult to reconcile, given the circumstances. Does the hon. member favour having the Speaker try to keep members more on topic and force them to be more relevant in the way in which we interact in the Chamber?

Mr. Chuck Cadman: Speaking of referees, I imagine we could give you a whistle, Mr. Speaker, and we would have this place under control in a minute. I would have to agree with the member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough that the Speaker should be given more control.

I speak to lots of kids in high schools about their attitude toward each other. I will use the same words that I use with them. It boils down to having a bit of respect for each other in this place. More than anything else, the bottom line is that we need more respect for each other in this place. We can disagree because that is what this is all about, but we need more respect for each other. It would make the Speaker's job a lot easier if we could bring that about.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hour is late and we are approaching midnight. The fact that so many members are present and anxious to continue debating this matter speaks a great deal to the passion and determination on the part of parliamentarians from all parties in the House about the need to change this place to make it more functional and to regain the golden age of true parliamentary tradition that many have spoken about today.

I feel an obligation this evening, no matter how late, to put forward my thoughts and to repeat some of the concerns expressed by my colleagues in the New Democratic Party. I feel that compulsion in part because the seat I represent was held by two of the greatest parliamentarians this place has ever seen.

I follow on the heels of Stanley Knowles and David Orlikow, two individuals who devoted their entire lives to service on behalf of the people they represented and in the interest of preserving parliament and all its traditions.

• (2350)

Those two individuals certainly taught me, and I am sure many other members of the House, the importance of preserving and respecting the role of the individual member of parliament and always coming back to that driving force which caused all of us to run for political life and to enter this place.

Stanley Knowles and David Orlikow epitomize the desire to serve public office in order to represent and empower constituents. The desire to pursue change, to devote our lives to using parliament to make society a better place, from whatever perspective we come from, from whatever political philosophy that is driving us and encouraging us in our chosen career, and the desire to empower the people we represent is surely the essence of the debate tonight.

Some have suggested in the course of today's debate that there are other motives, that in fact some of us are trying to grab more power for the sake of having more power. Some have questioned individual motives and intentions. I hope that is just an indication of the frustration members are feeling about this place in terms of it being a functional institution.

I believe there is not a person in the House who is seeking to change the rules, to push for parliamentary reform, just to have more power, just to wrest power from the government or just to have more avenues to embarrass the government of the day. We are all seeking and striving for parliamentary change to allow us to be more effective members in doing what we sought to do when we entered this very difficult career path.

As the hon. member for Winnipeg—Transcona said, this debate is all about getting some balance in this place, about giving members the ability to exercise the responsibilities they have embarked upon. It is about living up to the notion of independent minded elected representatives. It is about allowing MPs to play a decisive role on legislation and to pursue the role that electors expect of us, which is to be watchdogs of the public purse.

We are desperately trying to rebalance power in this place and to deal with the fact that power has shifted so much from individual elected representatives, from members of parliament, to forces outside the elected arena. It has shifted to forces outside parliament, to forces with little accountability and ability on the part of

people to know that they have some control, some power and some ability to influence the shape of their own lives and the destiny of the country.

The debate is surely about trying to ensure that we can participate in the democratic process to encourage the people we represent to be more active in democratic institutions, in the political process.

How do we deal with the sense that people have of being helpless and hopeless in the face of many external factors when we start feeling helpless and hopeless in this place? Could there be any among us who do not feel helpless and hopeless from time to time and sometimes more often than not?

• (2355)

I entered this place in 1997 with great expectations, anticipation and hopes about being able to exercise the responsibilities handed to me by the electors of Winnipeg North Centre. I held out great hopes and aspirations about being able to influence the course of events and being able to pursue change, the very force which caused me to enter politics in the first place. I am not discouraged and I have not given up, but I can say that my experience in this place has been much less than I expected.

I made a deliberate decision to move from provincial politics to the federal arena because I believed that there were traditions and institutions, as a part of this place, that would allow me to be an effective representative and to give me the opportunity to pursue the kind of change that I thought my community needed.

It has been rather disappointing. I especially expected that this place would offer an opportunity to pursue thorough independent research and investigation through our process of standing committees in the House of Commons. I expected that because it is a process we do not have in the Manitoba legislative assembly. We do not have standing committees that function on an ongoing basis which allow for independent research and investigation. Needless to say I have been very disappointed by what I have experienced, at least with one committee in the House.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Not the health committee.

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis: My colleague says it for me, the health committee. I want to say the health committee may be unique in terms of being dysfunctional. However, based on what I have heard today, it is not that out of character. We have a systemic problem in terms of our committee system.

Our committees, and certainly the health committee, are used and abused by the government of the day. We have problems with the chairing of our meetings but our problems go much deeper. I have said this before in the House. Our fundamental problem is that the committee system has become a tool of the government to

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shape its own agenda. We are used to keep busy, to rubber stamp government programs without being allowed to pursue any kind of independent research and thorough investigation.

I do not need to go into great detail tonight about all the difficulties we have experienced on the health committee. Suffice it to say, we have to change the system because we are not doing our job as parliamentarians. We are not serving the public on some of the key issues of the day.

When it comes to the health committee we have been used by the government and directed in terms of our efforts as opposed to being allowed to pursue what is clearly at the top of the minds of Canadians. That certainly has to be at the heart of what we do. We have to be allowed the ability and the resources to pursue the issues that are at the top of the minds of Canadians.

In terms of all the issues being discussed today, if we can do one thing, that is if we can reform the committee system and allow members of parliament to do thorough independent investigative research on issues that are at the top of the minds of Canadians and need to be explored by parliamentarians, we will have done parliament and the country a great service.

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Whereas it is now midnight, for all intents and purposes I wonder whether we could give permission to the pages, if they wish, to take their leave of this place. I am sure we could manage without them for now and that they need to sleep so they can study.

The Deputy Speaker: I do not see any opposition to the suggestion by the hon. member for Elk Island. I suppose we could call it a day for our pages and we will carry on.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (2400)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I believe the member who just spoke is too modest. She has a good reputation in the House, and it is well earned, for being prepared and doing the best that she can with the resources available. I think all members would agree.

Let us not be too full of ourselves, though, because we all know that 99.99% of the people in this place could never get elected as an independent. Therefore, we cannot consider ourselves to be members of parliament elected to come here to do a bunch of things as members of parliament.

I believe the member would concede that we are elected primarily as members of a parliamentary or political team. We run under a banner with a leader, with policy. In fact, what the people are voting for is a parliament. They are voting for members as

members of a team. If their team forms the government, they expect them to work very hard to implement the platform they brought to the House with them. If their team is not elected to government, their role will be the role of the opposition.

We have the official opposition. We have the other parties of the opposition. Their role is not to govern. It is to be the opposition and to do it very well. It is to seek accountability where there is none, to seek clarification where there is none, to seek information where there is none, and to point out deficiencies where there are deficiencies. It is a very difficult job. Many backbenchers in a majority government would say the opposition members have a better job because they have an opportunity to become national figures. They ask the questions they want to ask during question period.

Opposition MPs are different. Government MPs have a responsibility to support the team and the platform on which they ran and on which they were elected. They have a constitutional obligation to follow through on the things they ran for. If as a member of the government team I cannot support the government platform, if I cannot stand here to vote in favour of it, I should not be a member of that caucus. I should withdraw from the caucus and sit as an independent or maybe even resign.

Perhaps the member would like to comment on anything I have said. In fairness, it is how I feel about the different roles of opposition members and government members.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, in case my comments were misinterpreted by the member, let me be clear that I was not by any stretch of the imagination suggesting we leave aside our political labels and forget about the party system. I am a firm believer in responsible government and in the role of political parties. I bring to this place my views as a New Democrat.

I want to be clear with the member that when I talked about independent research at the committee level I was talking about work that is independent and free of political manipulation by the government of the day. That has been the experience of those of us who have served on the health committee for the past four years.

I am not sure if any other committee has experienced this, but each and every time our committee sat down to determine the agendas and the projects we wanted to undertake, the Minister of Health sent a letter to the health committee suggesting the topic of discussion and the Liberal members around that committee table sat and said "Yes, sir; no, sir; three bags full, sir".

That is the kind of difficulty I am talking about. I am not talking about giving up our party philosophy and our commitment to the beliefs that brought us here. I am talking about a process, a system of committees that allows members to sit around the table and

reach some agreement based on the priorities of the public and based on the issues of the day. We have not been allowed to do that in the health committee.

I ask the member for Mississauga South to work with us to end political manipulation and interference by the government in the work of a standing committee of the House.

• (2405)

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Surrey Central, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on behalf of the people of Surrey Central to participate in the debate.

Members of parliament are supposed to be elected to come to this place, to provide solutions to problems and to contribute to the improvement of our nation's policies. What we have seen over the last decade more than ever before is a significant growth in the concentration of political power in the Prime Minister's Office.

As the executive branch of parliament gets stronger, our legislative branch, the House, gets weaker. MPs find themselves with less meaningful roles to play in our legislative process. The opportunities for members of parliament to improve legislation and participate in policy development is decreasing. Members of parliament and Canadians become frustrated.

The long term objective of political parties is success in elections. It is at the expense of or to the detriment of the work we are supposed to do here. The government often chooses to pass legislation as fast as possible. This thwarts the efforts of the opposition parties to ensure that the House passes the best possible legislation.

Opposition parties are not willing to let legislation pass quickly for the sake of passing it, so they tend to slow down the passage of legislation for the purpose of improving it. The government uses time allocation and closure to curtail or even shut down debate in the House to prevent the efforts of opposition parties.

The weak Liberal government has an abysmal record when it comes to using closure and time allocation to limit debate on the business of the House. This results in a less co-operative atmosphere and produces a more confrontational environment in the House. The media dramatize and promote that confrontation. This parliamentary battlefield prevents the House from pursuing its mandate to be a forum that improves legislation and forms or tests new policies. It causes debate to be redundant and meaningless many times.

Very few members of parliament attend the daily debate in the House. Most MPs leave the Chamber immediately after question period. Debate in the House should allow for passionate arguments to provide political persuasion. Debate should be free, open, fair and not subject to arbitrary limitations.

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The proceedings of the House have become no more than a formal exercise. Members of parliament, the media and the public in general pay very little attention to debate in the House. On the government side most of those speeches are scripted anyway.

The Prime Minister never attends debate in the House, while cabinet ministers also very rarely—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind members not to reflect on the absence of members.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the intervention. I will take your advice. The purpose I was trying to communicate was that debate should be meaningful and more members should be listening and participating in debate in a meaningful way.

Nothing in the contributions during debate changes what cabinet has decided. The ministers adopt none of the recommendations made by members of parliament in debate in the House.

The outcome of the votes in the House can be predetermined because there are no free votes allowed by the government. Not everything has to be a vote of confidence. In other words, what I am saying is parliament has become a rubber stamp for the agenda of the Prime Minister's Office and the passage of legislation is reduced to a formality or a constitutional requirement.

All MPs are in the House for question period anyway. Why will the government not allow scheduled votes to take place immediately following question period? It would save some time.

Speaking of question period, the defining moment each day in the House is question period and it has become a circus. There are virtually no informative answers given even to important questions asked during question period.

• (2410)

Private members' business is another example of where the influence of individual members of parliament has been diminished. Virtually none of the private members' bills or motions are passed by the House. The very few that are passed are usually killed in the Senate. All private members' business should be votable.

The resources available at the House of Commons to assist private members' business have either shrunk or dried up. This includes legislative drafting lawyers. Private members' business is just like a pacifier given to a baby. The baby quietly keeps on working with it, in the hope that something will come out of it. Despite a lot of hard work, nothing comes out of it. That is what private members' business has become in the House. Nothing comes out of it.

The committee system in this place has become more important than the work in the House because that is where the field of action

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has moved. Even the committees are stifled because of the partisan nature in which they operate. Their membership is dominated by a majority of government members who tightly control the work of the committees. Government members often gang up on opposition members.

The chairs of the committees are appointed or designated by the PMO. They are not elected. Future business of the committee and witnesses to appear before the committee are decided in a partisan manner.

The government is also fighting to prevent committee hearings from being televised. It knows that the way it runs committees is a farce. Ministers just go there to introduce bills but do not hear the witnesses, the debates or the amendments to legislation with which the committees deal. Debates in committees also become redundant and meaningless most of the time.

Canadians engage in a great deal of time and effort preparing petitions. After the submission of petitions in the House by their representatives, the petitions are put on a shelf and a small reply, which is meaningless most of the time, is issued after a few months. The government takes no effective action on petitions. Since I have been elected I have not seen any significant action being taken by the government on petitions.

Whenever delegations from the Parliament of Canada travel abroad, it should be a team effort. Many times opposition MPs are denied briefings and are left out of some of the events and meetings abroad.

The ethics counsellor should be appointed by parliament instead of by the Prime Minister and only reporting to the Prime Minister.

An additional standing committee should be created and chaired by the opposition. Its mandate should be to review and report to the House on all aspects of acts and reports of the privacy and access commissioners and of the ethics counsellor.

The appointment of the clerk of the House, with due respect to the clerk who is a very nice person, by the Prime Minister defeats the purpose of election of the Speaker by the House. The appointment of officers of parliament, for example the privacy and access to information commissioners and auditor general, et cetera, should receive a committee review before the motion is presented to the House.

Most of the time too many government bills are empty of content. They do not go far enough and are only window dressing. I am talking about many bills. Too many government bills are followed by a large number of regulations which are not debated in the House. I consider that to be governing through the back door because regulations which control the whole intent of bills are not debated in the House.

An hon. member: You are speaking the truth.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Absolutely. The government prevents the House from dealing properly with the expenditures of the government. The supplementary and interim supply budgets are hardly dealt with at all. Even the scrutiny of money spent by the government, the real purpose of being here, does not occur in the House most of the time.

• (2415)

With the large number of MPs being re-elected and returning to the 37th parliament, the time is ripe for change. MPs should be considered as a resource, capable of adding value to the legislation introduced by the government.

Committees should be used to test the soundness of policies in different parts of Canada. This could help to bridge the gap between regional differences that we saw in the last election. Strengthening committees could also result in a more public or transparent legislative process. It could also contribute to a diffusing of the confrontational environment in our parliament. This in turn would enhance the public's image of parliament.

The present parliamentary system is an assault on the rights of the elected representatives of the Canadian people in the House. This government must wake up to the needs of people in the new millennium.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it has come to light that members of the Canadian Police Association were just on the Hill to politely lobby all members of parliament to address some very serious concerns that the security personnel of our country, our front line enforcement officers, want to bring to the attention of all members of parliament in a very serious manner.

To their surprise, they were advised that all the Liberal members of parliament were given speaking notes by the Prime Minister's office on what to say to them when they got here. It is absolute nonsense when members of parliament cannot even speak their own minds or freely offer an opinion.

Talk about manipulation 101. It is absolutely incredulous that the government would even attempt to do that. I understand it happens all the time.

Would my hon. colleague from the Canadian Alliance Party comment on that, please?

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member, who works very hard, like a few of the other members in the House, for his valid question and valid concern. It is not only of concern to members of the House, it is also of concern to the public.

This is the highest Chamber in the nation and we are honoured and privileged to be here to represent our constituents. However, when we are muted not to say what our constituents are telling us to say in this Chamber, that is an affront to democracy. In my opinion, it is not only anti-democratic, it is a dictatorship in the House.

The hon. member noted one particular occasion where members were given talking points and could not talk outside those talking points. That is a shame. We need parliamentary reform in the House so that members are able to speak their mind in the House.

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I particularly want to pay homage to the member for Surrey Central who, I suspect, if one were to analyze *Hansard*, speaks more frequently on bills and motions than any other member of this place, certainly of my party. One exception might be the hon. member for Pictou-Antigonish—Guysborough who has to carry about four different portfolios.

The member for Surrey Central is profligate in his contribution to debate here. He makes those many interventions precisely because he does believe profoundly in the importance of the deliberative function of this body. I know he has studied political science and has travelled and seen parliaments in the British system and other congressional systems abroad.

Perhaps he could reflect for a moment on whether he believes that other parliaments take more seriously the sort of debate to which he so frequently contributes than we do here in this parliament and how we could perhaps emulate the more sober use of parliamentary debate that other institutions use.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his comments and compliments. He is a very articulate member of the House when he speaks. I always look forward to listening to him and to learning from him when he speaks.

• (2420)

Talking about other parliaments in the world, even smaller democratic countries have made lots of progress.

When I was the co-chair of the scrutiny of regulations committee I noticed that the regulations in Canada that had been disallowed, were in the pipeline for the last 25 years. When the committee contacted the ministers and other members of the government, they stonewalled the committee. Those regulations have been in the pipeline for 25 years. The number of those regulations is about 800. That is one example of how the government stonewalls its own committee.

Talking about private members' business in other parliaments, I have visited parliaments in other countries. I was amazed at how conducive the environment in other parliaments was when free debate took place. I even think the environment in Quebec's national assembly is more conducive for reasonable debate compared to any other legislature in this country. The committees have also made a lot of progress in that field.

I concur with the hon. member when he says that the government should allow free debate in the House.

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Mr. Greg Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is case of who is going to tire here first, you or myself.

I think this is one of the few times when we could say that the tone in the House tonight was more conversational than what it normally is. Maybe we are a little more reflective which is what comes, I guess, with the late night sessions. However it has really been an interesting night.

I have a few comments that I want to make. The member of parliament whom I replaced in the House was Fred McCain. He had been a member of parliament for many years representing a riding called Carleton—Charlotte, a riding that I first represented. He was a great parliamentarian. Before him, there was a member of parliament named Hugh John Flemming, the former premier of the province of New Brunswick. I am following in some pretty big footsteps.

One of the things Mr. McCain mentioned to me early in my parliamentary career was that my constituents want to be proud of me. That is so true. I think we all have seen that they really do.

There are some obvious examples of that tonight here in the House of Commons. We have a group of young Canadians with us. I think every member who is presently here in the Chamber is or has been involved with the Forum for Young Canadians. I know you, Mr. Speaker, have been involved in that program where young Canadians come to Ottawa and learn firsthand how parliament works. They come to question period. I know as Speaker, you have them come into the Chamber. They take seats in the House. It is really educational. I know their teachers look forward to having some of their students come to Ottawa. It is a really well run program sponsored by certain corporations, as well as the Parliament of Canada. Some very dedicated government officials make sure this program works.

I had the pleasure of having supper with those students tonight, because they always have a supper with members of parliament. I know the member from Winnipeg, the member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough and other members were also at the supper. After supper we brought some of the young forum members over to the House to watch tonight's late night session. They were absolutely fascinated with the process of parliament. Some of us went to the control room where they do all the filming of the House with the cameras and all the technology that allows us to be broadcast across the country.

• (2425)

I actually took two of them into the East Block. One of these young Canadians sat down in the very chair that our first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, sat in. The security guards were generous enough to let us in. It was a real thrill for them to be here. Truly, they are proud of their members of parliament. It is something that I think we should do more of with Canadians. We

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should engage Canadians in the process of how government works and how well it can work when we can focus on some of the big issues.

I want to specifically talk in terms of reinventing parliament and talk about some of the things that we can do in this institution that would help us a little. I think we are all offering some advice here and there, some advice bigger than others, but one of the particular things that concerns me, which I guess our House leader often calls my hobby horse of the day or my little pet peeve, is the questions we put on the order paper.

Members of parliament are entitled to four questions and four questions only on the order paper. For the viewing public, if there is anyone left out there watching us at this late hour, the reason we have questions on the order paper is because we cannot expect ministers, for example, to answer a very technical, detailed question on the floor of the House of Commons. It is impossible for them to do that. Some of the questions demand more than a 35 second response, as in oral question period, to which the ministers are restricted, so we put some of the questions on the order paper. It is our belief, as opposition members of parliament, and even as government members who sometimes put questions on the order paper, that Canadians are entitled to know questions of concern to them. They want the answers.

As an example of how flawed the system of putting questions on the order paper is, we are entitled to only four questions at a time. Presently I have four questions on the order paper. Unbelievable as it may sound, two of those questions will be celebrating their first birthday in the House in the next 30 days. I can see the Speaker grinning. It is hard to believe that a member of parliament could put questions to the government in written form which have gone unanswered for an entire year. As I said last week, I will be blowing out candles on their birthday cake very shortly. It is very frustrating.

The difficulty is that it is, in some cases, in the government's best interest not to answer those questions because sometimes it is an embarrassment to the government. The government asks why it should be in a hurry to answer questions from the member for New Brunswick Southwest or the members from Winnipeg or South Shore because if it answers those questions, more will be put on the order paper. It then stalls, and if it does not have to answer the questions, all the better because the member is limited to four questions. That is the position I am in as a member of parliament.

The questions are very serious in tone. One question has to do with the selling of 40 Huey helicopters by the Government of Canada. This was brokered out to a firm by the name of Lancaster Aviation Inc. Those 40 helicopters were actually purchased by a U.S. firm but our belief now is that these 40 Hueys have shown up in Colombia. For what purpose? That is basically sidestepping the rules that we have employed as a peacekeeping nation.

In addition to that, I have a question on 10 Challenger aircraft that were auctioned off or brokered through that same company by the name of Lancaster Aviation Inc. The question had to do with where those Challenger aircraft wound up. Again, I think the Canadian people have a right to know the answers to those questions.

In the British parliament, the government has two weeks in which to answer those questions.

● (2430)

If the Prime Minister of Canada, tomorrow morning, wanted answers to those same questions, would he have to wait a solid year for them? I think he would have them in an hour.

The parliamentary secretary in charge of this file is completely embarrassed, on a personal level, that members of parliament on this side of the House have to wait a solid year for answers to legitimate questions. The Canadian public does have a right to know.

That is just one small example how this place could be reformed. Some of it is common courtesy to the people we represent.

You could never get elected, Mr. Speaker, and you are a long serving member in this House, as a member of parliament if you went back to your constituency week after week for a solid year without answering some of the questions and concerns of constituents. That is the situation we find ourselves in.

All the government has to do is say that there will be a change in attitude and in culture at the time, and it will not cost us anything.

Mr. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, two of the recent speakers, who are still in the House, spoke about the great members of parliament who have served before them. This gives me an opportunity to do something I have wanted to do for some time, in a non-partisan and co-operative way.

I would like pay tribute to two of the great parliamentarians who were in my riding Yukon before me. One person is Erik Nielsen, who commented on the House in a book entitled *House is not a Home*. The other person is Audrey McLaughlin, the first woman to lead a political party in Canada. Those are two great parliamentarians who partly shaped the history and the changes in this House. I think as former Yukoners, we should all pay tribute to them.

The member from the Conservative Party asked me where the aircraft went. My father worked for A.V. Roe. I would like to you to tell me where the Avro Arrow went?

The Deputy Speaker: I would like to make sure that we have not forgotten about the Speaker. Please, when you are directing your questions or your answers it might sometime be handy to come through the Chair. The hon. member for New Brunswick Southwest.

Mr. Greg Thompson: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to resurrect Mr. Diefenbaker tonight. We will get the crystal ball out or maybe the Ouija board and maybe John himself could answer that.

Anyway, I do not know where the Avro Arrow is. It is a mystery to me.

Mr. Peter MacKay: Where did the GST problems go?

Mr. Greg Thompson: Where did the GST problem go? I do not know.

An hon. member: Was the landing on the moon a hoax?

Mr. Greg Thompson: The member from Winnipeg says was the landing on the moon a hoax.

We are trying to arrive at some consensus in terms of how the House can resolve some of the difficulties that we see, and truly some of the difficulties that the viewing public sees. Believe it or not people watch this on television. They take a serious interest in democracy and they like to see it working. It is incumbent upon us to make the system work. One small way in which I think we can do that is to approve the way in which questions on that order paper are answered.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows that in the last federal election 42% of Canadians who had a right to vote decided to stay home.

If there are no changes to the way the House operates, or at least given the perception that there is modern change to the way we do our jobs, does he believe that the percentage of vote will actually decrease even more and that more people will write us off, stay home and forget to exercise their most democratic right, which is their right to vote?

Mr. Greg Thompson: Mr. Speaker, that is a great question. I think that people have to be engaged, that they have to be part of a process, feel that their views are important and that individual members of parliament are empowered or have the ability to go on the floor of the House of Commons and present that point of view. I am not sure if I have answered that properly but I want to get it in before my time expires.

● (2435)

One of the things in which I am disappointed is the election turnout. We do not want to get into the situation we see happening south of the border where fewer Americans every election are voting. It is now down to around 50%. We are headed in the same direction.

Obviously one of the things we did was go to a permanent elections list. There were huge problems with that in the last election. However, enumeration is still an important part of the process. People are reminded one-on-one when enumerators knock

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on doors and say that their votes count, that they are entitled to vote and where they will vote when polling day takes place.

We have to consider going back to that. I know it probably is a step backwards in the minds of a lot of people. It is a human touch to the whole process which I think has generated more interest in our electoral system than some other nations.

The Americans, for example, have a permanent voters' list which they have had for many years. It has been one of the reasons for the lower turnout in the United States. It may be a little more expensive to do it but it would be worth the price. I hope that we can encourage more Canadians to vote.

It is a professional approach to this business of politics. The openness and transparency that Canadians expect, would be the greatest way we could generate enthusiasm, excitement and interest that we would all like to see.

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, thank you for staying with us here so late this evening. Of course thanks also to the people at the table, the other staff who are here, including the interpreters and technical staff. It is great that everyone here is participating in making it possible for us to keep up the reputation of this place as the place of many words.

I was reminded of a friend of mine who went back to what he called his motherland. I will not mention what country it is because it is not nice to pick on the people from Holland. He said he went back to visit his relatives and there was one thing that amazed him. Everybody spoke at the same time and no one was listening. I hope that is not true here tonight.

I will be quite specific to the topic we are addressing tonight, and that is the change in the standing orders. Right now it is only about 10.40 p.m. back home in Alberta and only 9.40 p.m. in British Columbia. That is why some of us who are from the west are still feeling so energetic and ready to go for a couple more hours.

However, if any of them are watching, and perhaps others, they should know that the standing orders are the rules which regulate, not only the debate in the House but also pretty well the management of committees, and the way things are done around here in terms of taking an idea through the process where it actually becomes legislation.

In my intervention I would like to reinforce a few things and perhaps come up with one or two ideas which members may not have heard during the debate today.

First, I do not think this requires a change in the standing orders since they already permit the television broadcast of committees. However, it was mentioned by several that perhaps there should be greater coverage of committees by television. I would like to make a suggestion, and I am not sure it requires a change in the orders as they are.

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One thing that occurred to me was that there are probably increasingly more people who have access to the Internet than who have access to cable or satellite. With the new satellite dishes, perhaps that will change. I do not know the exact numbers, but I would like to recommend that a very inexpensive way of making it possible for Canadian citizens to watch their parliament at work would be to have an Internet where people could go to the House of Commons. There would be a place to click committees to view a committee. Then they pick which committee they want to see and there it is with the video streaming on the screen. We could enable I imagine millions of people who would be glued to their computers watching. Technically, it is quite possible to do that. It is relatively inexpensive and does not cost any more. I know we are putting up satellites in order to get Internet access to all the remote parts of the country now. It could be a tremendous unifying force for our country.

• (2440)

An hon. member: Congress is already doing that.

Mr. Ken Epp: My colleague said that congress is already doing that.

Second, I would like to mention petitions. Right now Standing Order 36 says a member can submit a petition. As one of my colleagues said earlier, nothing is ever done with them. When we had the issue of child pornography in British Columbia, I believe we had we had over 500,000 names on petitions, yet that evoked no reaction from parliament.

One thing we could do to connect Canadian citizens to parliament and increase the respect of the House, would be to have a plan of action. If petitions came into the House in certain numbers, using a threshold say of 100,000, 200,000 or whatever, and of course would be up to the committee to decide, then it would necessitate a motion being put before the House and debated for a day with an action plan on how to deal with the petitioners' request. I think that makes a lot of sense. Otherwise, the work that citizens do to gather petitions really becomes a meaningless exercise other than just to bring their issue to the fore and into the conscience of more people.

In my remaining time I would like to talk primarily about private members' business. There are other topics too. Many of my colleagues and people from other parties have mentioned them today so I will not repeat them. I agree with much of what has gone on, but I want to talk about private members' business.

I happen to be one of those members who is not lucky. The only time I have ever won anything in my life was when I was trucking.

There was one place where we used to stop to eat in Alberta. It had what we call out west student scribblers or notebooks. It had the numbers one to fifty written down the side. We signed it whenever we bought a meal. When all the numbers had been signed for, the restaurant would write one to fifty on pieces of paper, put them in a little bowl and pick one. I won a free meal once in my life. Other than that, I have not won a great deal other than winning the hand of a beautiful woman in marriage many years ago. We have been married 40 years. That is a major win.

However, I am not very lucky, and in this House I have bombed. I have been here for seven years going on eight. I have not yet been selected on private members' business. Therefore, I propose a small change. Instead of having a random draw, I propose that all members elected to a parliament be put in a random order. I would be willing to provide my limited computer skills to do that. I have taught that sort of thing when I was teaching at the college. It could be computerized and the members would be listed in order. That means that we would go down the order and each one of those members would have the opportunity to have a bill brought before the House. If they declined, that would be fine. They would be moved to the bottom of the list and that list. That list in that order would stay for the duration of the parliament.

If members resigned, then of course their space would become vacant. Any new members elected in a byelection would automatically be put at the bottom of the list. If there were four byelections on the same day, then those four members would be put in random order at the bottom of the list. At least then we would be able to move up.

I did a rough calculation. We could increase the number of hours per week on private members from the present five to 10. This could be accomplished, for example, by having another private members' hour from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. If we had 10 hours per week, then in a parliament which lasted more than three years, of course with this current Prime Minister three and a half years is more or less the norm, every member could have their bill put forward and, if it were so arranged, there could be three hours of debate on each bill.

• (2445)

Then I propose that every bill be votable. It is useless to come up with a good idea and simply talk about it for one hour and then say it is dropped to the bottom of the order paper. Actually it is dropped into the garbage can. It is dropped off the order paper. Every member's bill should be votable.

I also would like to say that there are limited resources that are wasted here. When we came back to this parliament I had a couple of bills that I wanted to get into that first draw to increase my odds. I know all about this math stuff. When there are fewer

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people, the probability of being chosen is higher. I could not get them in because the staff were so overloaded they did not get to my bills. I did not get in on that draw.

What I propose is that each member be limited to no more than two bills or motions in the draw or at a time. That is fair, because they can only pick one. It goes through the whole rotation before there is a repeat of the list.

I have another consideration in regard to the standing orders that does cause a bit of a problem. I propose that no member be allowed to move an amendment to a private member's bill or motion without the consent of the mover. Sometimes the movers can be persuaded that they would have a better chance of getting it passed if they would agree to an amendment. If that amendment is not offensive, a member can choose to accept that amendment and then the debate and the vote will be on the amended motion. However, we have had several instances where a member's motion has been totally gutted by amendment. Then the government, with its majority, pushes it through and basically the private member's business is stolen from the member who proposed it.

I have more ideas here that I could talk about but I should respect the time. I will just mention one more item. I do not favour the suggestion that perhaps Fridays could become private members' days. I am worried about Fridays around here. I am one of the members who always makes it a point when the House is in session to be here the full week. I am often here on Fridays, and without saying anything about anyone specifically, you and I both know, Mr. Speaker, that the place is not exactly crowded on Fridays.

I would be a little worried about having private members' business relegated to Fridays, because its purpose is for the debates to occur in order for us to be able to persuade by reason, by argument and by good logic that a bill or a motion is worthy of support.

I will close my speech by giving the following bizarre suggestion, and that is that members' salaries would be paid for the week only if they actually showed up for private members' business on Friday.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton Southwest, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the hon. member for Elk Island. I think it is fantastic that he waited over 10 hours to give his speech on this very important subject and I certainly commend him for that.

I was very interested in his comments on private members' business. It is interesting that many members spoke very generally about parliamentary reform while this member had some very specific suggestions.

I would like to ask the hon. member if he has even more suggestions to give to the committee in regard to what should be implemented to make the House truly more democratic.

Mr. Ken Epp: I am certainly pleased to do that, Mr. Speaker, and I thank my colleague for the opportunity.

Yes, there are a number of other specific amendments. There is one, but I do not know if it can be put into the standing orders. I asked a question earlier in debate about whether or not free votes can actually be put into the standing orders. We have done a bit of that with respect to private members' business by changing the voting order. This was done in the last parliament. Instead of starting with the frontbenches so that all of the members can take their cue from how the cabinet is voting, we now start the voting at the backbenches. That goes for both sides of the House. I think we should be careful to retain that particular provision.

Furthermore, we should have true free votes. I would like to see that happen more often. I do not mind. Let us say that I have a motion or a bill and put it forward as private members' business and state the strongest case that I can for my idea, which hopefully represents the wishes of my constituents back home. I have a couple such bills in the hopper right now, which I cannot get to vote on and cannot even get to debate because they are not drawn.

• (2450)

Let us say that I put that bill or motion forward and present my strongest arguments in favour of it. If afterward the 300 members of the House of Commons say to me "hon. member for Elk Island, that is a dumb idea and we are going to vote against it", well, I gave it my best shot. In their wisdom the members said they would not vote for it. That is fine and I will accept that. I did not have a strong enough argument. I did not express it well. It is my problem.

However, if I am able to persuade them and they still vote against it because of some implied instruction from someone else, then I get a little upset, because I do not believe that our country, our democracy and our citizens are well served when we cannot, as a group of people in the largest council in the country, vote totally freely. I would like to actually see a standing order provision that would make it illegal, a breach of the orders, for anyone voting against the wishes of his or her party to ever be disciplined in any way by that party. I do not know whether that is possible. It is something that perhaps the committee would want to tackle.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to comment on the fact that if the government had really wanted to simplify the debate tonight, all it had to do was listen to the speeches from my hon. colleagues from Winnipeg—Transcona and Regina—Qu'appelle and go on the

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advice of what those two very learned gentlemen have brought forth to the House today. Then the government would understand exactly what it needs to do to change the House of Commons.

In earlier questioning I mentioned that 42% of Canadians, for whatever reason, did not exercise their most democratic right, which is their right to vote. There is a myriad of reasons as to why they did that.

However, time and time again when I speak at schools or at a forum of young Canadians or legions, wherever I go, I tell people that although I was not born in this country I am very proud to be a representative of my party in the House of Commons and to represent the constituents of my riding.

There are 116,000 reasons why people must vote. Those are the 116,000 brave men and women, many of them just a little older than some of the pages here, who are buried in over 60 countries around the world. Those brave men and women fought and died in the belief that this was the number one country in the world and that our ideals, our viewpoints and our spirit of democracy should be shared and respected with all other countries around the world.

In relation to what we can do specifically to change parts of the House, I want to mention five reports that I brought with me. I was on the fisheries and oceans committee from 1997 to 2000. We did 13 reports, 8 of them unanimous: the Nunavut report, the east coast report, the central Canada fresh water fisheries report, two west coast reports, the seal report, the Prince Edward Island report, and so on. The unique thing about these reports is that they were unanimous and produced not by three parties but by five political parties in the House of Commons: the old Reform Party, now the Alliance; the Bloc; the Liberals, the governing party; the NDP; and the Conservatives.

As we know, in committee we struggle for the preamble and for the recommendations. In order to make it unanimous, we all put a little water in our wine and we all agree on what the report should say based on the evidence we have heard. It takes an awful lot of time to do that.

We spent hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars doing these reports and going across the country listening to evidence from the people most affected by the concerns and the recommendations in these reports, only to have the government completely ignore all of the reports. Every last one of them was ignored.

● (2455)

I remember very clearly standing in the House of Commons trying to move concurrence on the east coast report back in 1998. I was shocked at what happened. I am naive and I will admit that, but I did not believe that members of parliament could actually do what they did, being the honourable people we are. When concurrence is moved on a report it means that the government has to move on those recommendations. The Liberal members who put their names

in the booklet and on the report stood up and voted against their own report.

Just shortly before that we were in towns like Pouch Cove and La Scie, Newfoundland, in Goose Bay, Labrador, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, et cetera. Everyone on that committee, including the government members, told those people who bared their hearts and souls to us in their evidence about the concerns of the fishing crisis they faced that we would go back to Ottawa, come up with a unanimous report and try to help them.

Only a short while later, government members of the committee stood up and voted against their own report. Why did we even bother doing it? Why did we not stay in our little offices and do exactly what the PMO or the ministers directed us to do? That was a shock. I could not believe that could happen.

There was another thing that happened and again I base it on ignorance of what can happen. If we really want to change parliament, we as members of parliament have to change ourselves. One of the better things we could do is to put a stop to this crossing of the floor if a member has a falling out with his or her party. Many members in the last parliament crossed the floor.

I find it absolutely astonishing that I, as a member of parliament for Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, elected as a New Democratic member, could just decide tomorrow that I might want to join the Alliance Party or the Liberal Party. All I have to do is go to the House leader of that party and tell him I want to join and I would be welcomed with open arms. Then, bang, I would be a member of that political party. However, that is not what the constituents voted for.

I have a bill in the hopper that has not been drawn yet, so I know what the member for Elk Island is going through, and it basically says that if a member has a falling out with his or her political party and wishes to leave, he or she would sit as an independent or quit. A member would have to run in a byelection under the new political banner and let the people of the riding decide the member's political future. That is democracy. That is being honest with constituents. If we are not honest with the people who voted us into this most honourable Chamber in the entire country, then we should not even be running for office.

Another example is the police association that is here in Ottawa. It has very serious, legitimate concerns about what police do for a living. The association wishes to bring those concerns to the attention of each and every member. The policemen and their association spend an incredible amount of money from their membership dues to come to Ottawa and address all members of parliament in a very formal manner about their concerns.

What they do not want to have is 170 and some members all singing from the same hymn book. They want to know exactly what the member from the Yukon is thinking or what the member

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from Mississauga is thinking and so on. They do not want to come to Ottawa to see prepared speeches for all members of the government which tell them what to say to the police association when the police come to their offices to speak to them. I was shocked. I beg the indulgence of the Speaker. I am amazed that I could be so naive as to think that does not happen. When I came to Ottawa to represent the constituency I did not believe that these shenanigans could happen, but they do.

• (2500)

One of the most shocking days I have ever had in the House of Commons was on the hepatitis C vote. I know very well, through private conversations, that a lot of backbench Liberals said they did not support the government position and that the Prime Minister had no right to make it a confidence vote.

One of the more respected members, a doctor, a wonderful woman, ended up in tears after that vote. Why? Because one person decided to make it a confidence vote.

Thousands of people in the country suffer from the terrible disease of hepatitis C. It was a good motion, brought forward by the Canadian Alliance. I believe it was the hon. member for Macleod who brought it forward. We had a great debate to move it forward and help those people, only to be turned down because one person said no. All the others followed in line like a bunch of sheep.

If we truly wish to change parliament we need to change ourselves.

I know a lot of Canadians are switching off Mike Bullard to watch this debate, so with that I would be more than willing to accept questions or comments from members.

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, of course they were switching channels during the commercials and just happened to run across CPAC, and there was an engaging speech so they stayed with it. I concur with that.

I have a specific question for the hon. member. The theme that has come up over and over today is the whole question of free votes versus making every vote a confidence vote. I am a little puzzled by it. I know the standing orders probably as well as the next member and I do not really know how we can, by changing the standing orders, force the government to not put pressure on its members or on any other party. I wonder if the hon. member has any ideas as to how that could be done in the standing orders.

To protect members, I suggested a rule that says if they vote against their party they will not incur sanctions from the party leadership. For example, the party cannot send the person to the furthest office in the precincts as a form of punishment. That is a

rule I thought of. I wonder if the hon. member has any specific concrete ideas as to how to handle that one.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, I believe confidence votes should only be on budgetary items or the throne speech. Everything else should be open.

All we need to do is look at the former member for York South—Weston, Mr. John Nunziata, who stood with principle and voted against the government on the GST. The red book promised to get rid of the GST. Only one member of the Liberal party stood and said his constituents had sent him to the House, his constituents had told him to vote against the GST and that was exactly what he would do. Mr. Nunziata's reward: to be kicked out of the Liberal caucus.

We must bear in mind that Mr. Nunziata was a member of the rat pack, and that when the Liberals were down and the Conservatives were up he did an awful lot of fighting to bring his party's stature back up in the House of Commons and raise its profile. His reward years later was to be kicked out of the Liberal caucus because he voted with his conscience and with the wishes of his constituents.

That can still happen today. The government has not learned anything from that example.

Mr. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is past 1 a.m. here. However as the member for Elk Island said, it is only 10 o'clock in the Yukon. I would like us all to remember Yukoners in some of these individual differences. I know they want to be heard, and I will try to keep trying to make them heard.

In relation to the point the hon. member, a former Yukoner, made about police talking points, I do not know what he is talking about. I have never seen such points. I do not think that is a fair comment.

The other point I will make relates to the point the hon. member made that we are the best country in the world to live in, and that is why many people sacrificed for us overseas. I believe we have kept faith with them. This body, like any body, reflects in its decision making processes complexities and human frailties, but it is always open to change. We have had a tremendous debate tonight in the spirit of that change. It will move on and be improved and become better as a result of this debate and of the continuing efforts of members.

• (2505)

In spite of all that, in spite of the imperfections of a system which tries to get 301 people to agree on anything, Canada is still the best country in the world. I am proud of that. I think the members who are part of making Canada the best country in the world are proud of that. I do not think we have broken faith, as John McCrae would say, with those who died for us. I am proud that we still live in the best country in the world.

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Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, yes, I did live in Watson Lake, Yukon for nine years. The hon. member for Yukon and I have many mutual friends in Whitehorse.

First, on his speaking notes I ask the hon. member to check with his staff because I have very solid information that every Liberal member of parliament received those speaking notes.

Second, the hon. member is absolutely right. In my opinion, and I am sure the opinion of many others here from all political parties, this is indeed the number one country in the world. However if he wants to know about our veterans he should speak to merchant mariners about the battle they face in trying to get compensation from the government after 56 years of struggle. They have a lot of difficulty with what the government has been doing in that regard.

In terms of this being the number one country in the world, there is no question about it.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton Southwest, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, let me say good morning to you. I thank you especially for staying here during the debate and I thank all the House officers as well. I know they are all looking at us and wondering what in God's name these parliamentarians are doing here so late.

I am here because this issue is supremely important. It is very important to all Canadians but in particular to the people of Edmonton Southwest. In the first week of March I had a town hall meeting in my riding. This was the most prominent issue that came up again, again and again.

People in Edmonton feel powerless over what happens here and over what the government does with their taxpayer dollars. They want parliament to reassert itself, and private members to reassert themselves, over the spending controls exercised by the government. They essentially want to take back their government and empower parliamentarians so that parliamentarians can act on their behalf. However they want to empower themselves as citizens so they will have more direct control over how they are governed.

I will read the motion for the record. It states:

That a special committee of the House be appointed to consider and make recommendations on the modernization and improvement of the procedures of the House of Commons;

In the spirit of fairness I congratulate the government for putting the motion forward and I would like to depart a bit. I know we are not supposed to draw attention to members in the House, but I would like to commend the hon. member for Yukon for diligently partaking in the debate as a member of the government. It is very much appreciated on this side of the House.

I am hopeful, yet somewhat sceptical, that we will be able to make substantive changes to parliament so that we can more effectively represent Canadians.

One of the things that has caused me great concern, before I entered politics and certainly since then, has been the decline of public confidence in politics in general and political institutions in particular. That is a very disturbing and sad trend. It is disturbing to me for two reasons. The first is more for intellectual reasons and deals with the whole nature of politics itself.

I come from a political science and political philosophy background. If one examines what the word "politics" means and where it comes from, it comes from the Greek word *polis* meaning city. This means the city state, which was to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle the classical form of government. It was a form in which Aristotle said every citizen knew the character of each and every other citizen. What that allowed was a full and deliberative discussion within the city and the political community so that people were self-governed and governed better.

• (2510)

This also points to the importance of rhetoric, the importance of discussion, the importance of what Plato called the dialectic between people who engage in a dialogue for the importance of serving the truth or improving the nature of the community. That is what the whole parliamentary system is about. We face each other across the aisle not to shout and scream, but because the government is supposed to propose and the opposition is supposed to critique and hold the government accountable. It is that tension between the government and the opposition that truly provides for good governance.

I learned another thing about politics after attending the dinner with the Forum for Young Canadians. Many of these youthful people are very inspired with politics and want to pursue it as a career. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer people who want to do that. The very essence of politics and politicians themselves seems to be declining in public favour, and that is tragic.

Referring to Aristotle, politics should be a noble calling. He listed contemplation as the highest, but he had politics as the second highest noble calling. We should all work toward restoring that.

The second reason I would list beyond the intellectual would be the personal. I have enjoyed the debate tonight because people have relayed some personal stories, particularly the member for Elk Island. My political mentor is really my father. I learned politics at his knee. It is interesting that I am a member of the Canadian Alliance today, yet he was a former Liberal who in 1968 helped

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elect a member in Edmonton named Hu Harries. He was a very independent minded and intelligent member who came to Ottawa. The system here did not utilize that member's talents. That certainly disillusioned my father.

The more important lesson my father taught me was when he and I disagreed, whether it was over the kitchen table or wherever, was the importance of listening and of respecting someone else's point of view. He taught me that we should not impugn motive to people who disagree us, we should challenge their ideas, policies and what they say, but not who they are. I think that sense of respect has to be restored to parliament.

Unfortunately, I have seen some incidents in the past week and a half that were especially disturbing to me. I am not going to go into them, but those sorts of incidents destroy deliberative debate in the House and they must be dealt with severely.

One of the reasons I ran for parliament was to raise the level of debate in the House and the level of political discourse in Canada. Raising the respect and decorum in the House is the first way we must do this. We must ensure that arguments are carried and that decisions are made based on the reason of arguments rather than the loudness of our voices.

I want to take some time to make some specific recommendations. The first one, and the government house leader mentioned this today, would be to have votes following question period on Tuesday. I certainly encourage him to do that. That is certainly one example of a recommendation that would improve the House.

In terms of question period, it was mentioned that the U.K. parliament had a thematic question period in one day. From what I have heard from people who have observed the British parliament, it is certainly an improvement. It allows for a more engaging discussion.

In terms of omnibus bills, we had a recent bill from the Minister of Justice. Comparing our political system to that in the United States, Tip O'Neill was the master of this, he would throw everything into one bill. It was a hodgepodge. That is against the legislative process. A bill should be limited to a specific issue and ideal.

In terms of committees, we should have the election of chairmen and vice chairmen by secret ballot. We should also not have chairmen removed for a year by the Prime Minister or the whip of the party.

There is another thing I recommend. As new MPs, we were privileged to have an orientation by some past members of parliament. One member in particular, Daniel Turp who used to be a member for the Bloc Quebecois, suggested having committees not sit when the House was sitting. He said it would improve the number of people who could then attend parliament, as well as improving the attendance at committees.

In terms of speeches in the House of Commons, I am going to make a suggestion that my former employer, Ian McClelland, made. He is certainly a good friend of yours, Mr. Speaker. He suggested that we possibly shorten the length of speeches in the House and lengthen the period of time for questions and comments. It would improve the discussion and debate across the sides of the House, even between different opposition parties.

● (2515)

In terms of the power of appointment, all government appointments should go through a committee or a parliamentary review. In terms of private members' bills, we must make them votable. We referred to former member John Nunziata who stated:

Let members bring their ideas forward. If it is not a good idea, that member will be held accountable for that bad idea by his constituents. Let the House itself view this bill. If it is not a good idea it will be rejected.

In conclusion, the whole notion of the confidence convention is the most fundamental change that must be made here. It was interesting listening to the government House leader when he said that he was not here to change the constitution and that he was not here to completely revamp Canada.

The fact is that if we do not change the way the confidence convention is applied in the House we will not truly make the necessary democratic reforms. We must ensure that a vote on a specific bill is just that, a vote on that specific bill. The confidence convention must be removed so that if a particular bill is defeated we can then call for a confidence convention and the government can vote a second time on whether there is confidence in the government. That seems entirely reasonable to me.

I wish to refer to the relationship between parliament and the judiciary that was mentioned earlier by the member for Toronto—Danforth. I know they are likely outside the scope of this committee, but I would like hon. members to consider that important relationship to ensure the House truly becomes the parliamentary institution it needs to be.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when growing up and studying history I always thought that Aristotle and Plato were social democrats, and now that has been confirmed by the hon. member from Edmonton. I thank him for that.

The member alluded to the behaviour of MPs in terms of respect for other MPs. Speaking for my party and I, we tend to have a good rapport with all members of parliament and good working relations with other staff within the House of Commons.

Would he not agree that in order to change parliament we as individual members of parliament need to change the way we interact with one another?

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Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, I should note that he was one of the first members to approach me as a new member and welcome me to the House, and I appreciate that.

He also said something very similar to what my father would say: discuss, debate and challenge each other on ideas but at the end of the day go together and have what he called a pop, relax and be friends. If we all had that sort of attitude about our place here, the House would be a much better place.

It is so necessary and it is something that I know the Speaker is trying to encourage through increasing the assembly of members of parliament as people who represent Canadians in a less partisan way. That would certainly be one way to improve the relationship of members in the House and the functioning of the House itself.

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, presuming the motion passes, and I am sure it will, you will be the chairman of the committee that will be looking at these changes, and I really welcome that.

I want to present an argument in favour of something my colleague mentioned about saving time of the House by conducting votes whenever possible right after question period when all the members are already here. I am sure the committee will want to look at whether there should be a change in how long the bells ring.

One very strong argument which I have not heard today with respect to changing the vote time is that it would not interrupt committees, particularly when we have witnesses. I find it so disconcerting to have witnesses come from various parts of Canada, sometimes from far away, and lo and behold the bells start ringing and we give them the rush. We tell them to hurry because we have to go and vote. Then we do not go back to them. Many of them have had their presentations truncated because of that. That is a very strong argument for one of the things that my colleague presented.

• (2520)

With respect to the general decorum in the House, I agree with him 100%. We should debate the issues, put forth our arguments and argue them in the way a lawyer argues in court. I have been to court very seldom, and each time it was just to observe. When I was there I never heard a lawyer yelling at a judge or at other lawyers. They do not do that.

They are there to present their case and to allow an opportunity for reason to prevail. I really miss that in this place, as my colleague said. Perhaps he wants to comment more. My intervention is more a comment than a question.

Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, that is the key, letting reason prevail. If there is no reason in what we do, we are irrational animals and the fact is that is what truly defines us. That is truly

what enables us to achieve what we have certainly achieved in the history of humanity. That is what we need in the House. We need respect and decorum on both sides and we must let reason carry the day.

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, thank you for your forbearance in the chair. I believe I am the last sheet to be hung here. I commend you. I suspect you will be chair of the committee contemplated in the motion and I gather the deputy clerk is slated to be clerk as well. Your presence late this evening indicates your commitment to this process.

I am also pleased to have seen the general quality of the debate and the spontaneity of most of the interventions contra the normal practice of too many members reading scripted speeches. Let me just say as a parenthetical remark that one parliamentary reform we ought to consider is the adoption of the rule of the Westminster mother parliament prohibiting verbatim reference to scripts for speech making in the House and allowing members to speak from their minds and not those of bureaucrats or their staff.

I wish to say at the outset that one of the reasons I chose to run, to represent my constituents and to serve in this place, for which I have enormous respect as something of an amateur student of parliamentary history, is precisely my great concern about the deterioration of democracy in Canada and the vitality of this institution.

There has been much commented on today but scholars such as Donald Savoie, a leading political scientist at the University of Moncton, three years ago published a book called *Governing from the Centre: the Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* in which he quoted an anonymous member of this current government's cabinet as saying that the cabinet was nothing more than a focus group for the Prime Minister's Office.

He said that the House of Commons was nothing more than a talking shop. In a sense he confirmed what we have always known, what the late Right Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau said, that members of parliament are nobodies 50 feet off the Hill. I suspect that many people would agree that members of parliament outside the executive branch are essentially nobodies on the Hill today.

For that reason I want to very pointedly argue that this has led to a kind of cynicism about this institution and, as my colleague before said, political institutions in general. Cynicism is a very corrosive thing when applied to institutions in a political culture that require trust and active involvement on the part of the citizenry.

As long as people, voters, taxpayers and citizens regard this institution as a futile talking shop, a de facto electoral college for the executive branch, their faith in democracy and democratic institutions will be undermined and we will see the consequences of that.

• (2525)

In other words, we cannot take democracy for granted. It is a system that has evolved. This constitutional monarchy, with a democratic legislature and a representative legislature, is a system that has evolved over centuries of struggle. It did not arrive overnight.

There is nothing to guarantee that it will exist in perpetuity. Neither a written constitution nor a judiciary filled with good intentions will preserve the democratic spirit of this constitutional monarchy. All that will guarantee that in perpetuity is the will of the citizenry, and we corrode that with the kind of centralization of power which exists today.

In an historical perspective, for centuries the commoners in this tradition fought the crown to obtain the power to represent their interests, particularly the power of the purse. Over centuries, from the 14th century right through to the 20th century, that power was devolved from the crown into the legislature, into the Commons.

In the latter half of the last century in this parliament we have seen the delineation between the crown and the legislature blurred. Essentially the ancient power and prerogatives of the medieval crown which were exercised with great authoritarian zeal in British monarchies have now been usurped by the prime minister. The prime minister, who acts in the name of the crown, has become a modern monarch for all intents and purposes.

For that reason I am very concerned about the terms of reference and the title of this committee which calls for recommendations on the modernization and improvement of the procedures of the House of Commons.

Virtually all changes in the standing orders over the years which have diminished the prerogatives and powers of individual members and the opposition parties to delay bills, to force further consideration of them, to add amendments, have occurred in the name of modernization, efficiency and improvement.

The one mention in the throne speech of modernizing parliamentary practice was electronic voting. What I heard was the government whip, a position with which you, Mr. Speaker, have some familiarity, wanting to reduce the time it takes for members to vote so as to remove from the opposition parties one of the few opportunities they yet have to filibuster government bills to which they are strenuously opposed, a tactic which has been employed by this and other opposition parties.

With electronic voting, a modernization, an efficiency measure, we would take less time to vote. That is precisely the problem. Time is one of the very few levers at the disposal of the opposition

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to slow down the otherwise unrestrained juggernaut of government legislation.

I send out a very strong caution to my colleagues at the outset of this committee. We do not need to modernize this place. We need to rediscover the ancient prerogatives which reside in this place that we have allowed to be diminished by the executive branch amending the standing orders year after year, decade after decade, and by convention centralizing power in the hands of the executive at the expense of this legislature.

We do not need to modernize this place. We need to reform it, and reform it in a radical way. The Latin root of radical is actually roots. We need to go back to our roots. Radical reform means going back to our history, and that means understanding that we are individual actors, individual moral actors in this place as legislators, and not cogs in some wheel created by the executive branch.

One of the principal ways we could do this is by ending the absurd charade of the confidence convention. I heard the government House leader say that it would require an amendment to the constitution. That is absolute nonsense.

• (2530)

The topical issue even in today's *National Post* by professor emeritus of political science Jack McLeod, says:

It is a mistake to believe the power of party discipline is carved in constitutional stone. Parties were not mentioned in the original BNA Act of 1867. For that matter, neither was the nature of the Cabinet, the powers of the prime minister, or in fact the basic principle of responsible government.

There is absolutely no reason why the government could not, as previous governments have in the past 20 years, regard motions or bills defeated as simply motions and bills defeated, and not as measures of confidence in the government. It is a ruse by which the whip maintains otherwise total control of his or her caucus and it is an aberration amongst the parliamentary forms of government, our sister parliaments in the Commonwealth. Even our mother parliament allows far greater latitude in freedom of voting than we do in this place.

My colleagues and the official opposition have outlined a whole series of potential reforms, 21 to be precise. I will not be exhaustive in listing all those, except to say that the power of the free vote would be the most significant to wield.

In closing, I also hope that the special committee will not limit its purview so narrowly as to preclude consideration of broader democratic reforms which would require the involvement of the House, such as the adoption of recall measures, citizen initiated referenda measures and electoral reform, so that we could have a lower house that would actually reflect the plurality and diversity of political views in the country.

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If we seize this opportunity with courage, we may actually be able to see a revival of the democratic spirit in this place. That is my hope. Unfortunately, based on history, that is not my expectation.

Mr. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a couple of members opposite have mentioned their families and I would like to take this time to pay tribute to my mother, Mabel Evelyn Bagnell. Without her I would not be here today. I also thank members opposite for staying this late. It is 1.30 in the morning and I will probably be the last speaker.

The previous speaker talked about pride in this institution and how important it is for our democracy. I wish to go on record saying that I will always have pride in any contribution that I can make to this institution.

The previous two speakers talked about a lack of power. I will close by saying that, regardless of how many reforms we can get through, people should not lose faith or courage. I remember back to what someone said tonight about the great parliamentarian Shaughnessy Cohen and what she accomplished under difficult circumstances. We all have constraints in our lives.

I think of Joan and Doug Craig, who fought for years for a windmill, which now exists on a mountain in the Yukon. I think of Ross Findlater and George Green who, without any authority created an anti-poverty coalition, which has done great things in the Yukon.

I think of the thousands of volunteers who, with no paid job or any authority and in this year of the volunteer, have moved mountains and created great things in the Yukon.

I think of Mother Teresa who, without a seat in any parliament or without any legislative authority, created great things in the world.

Finally, I think of the Chinese student who stood in front of that tank in the great film clip.

We in the House and all Canadians should take power because we can make a difference.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I am overwhelmed. I do not know what to say, but I thank the member for his intervention.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton Southwest, Canadian Alliance): Mr. Speaker, I was very interested in what the member was saying. I know he has very extensive knowledge of how parliaments work and parliamentary history. I know he referenced the famous book *Governing from the Centre: the Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* by Donald Savoie.

He and other parliamentary historians have talked about how, for the first 50 years of our nation, we had great involvement by

private members. It was really a parliamentary democracy at that point and then it moved into more of a cabinet democracy, particularly in the 1950s. Today, here and now in the 21st century, we basically have what he calls court government, which is exactly as the hon. member described. We are almost back to having a monarch again. We are almost in pre-Magna Carta times.

• (2535)

I fully agree that we should not modernize this place. We must democratize this place. I agree the confidence convention and the free vote are the most important aspects of democratizing this place. Besides the confidence convention and the free vote, what other suggestions would the hon. member make to really restore this place to true parliamentary democracy?

Mr. Jason Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the notion of increasing the votability of private members' bills would tremendously empower MPs as independent legislators. Yet again, because there is something of a convention of quasi free votes on those matters, I think we would see many good ideas coming forth.

However, I also think it is time for us to seriously consider complementing what is best about this institution and reviving it by taking power that exists in the Prime Minister's Office and giving it to people. I am a cynic. I am a pessimist. We could change the standing orders of this place, but the conventions exist. The centralization of power exists not because of the standing orders but because of politics and power and because of ambition and the desire of people to get into cabinet, to get parliamentary secretaryships or even to take trifling trips abroad. As long as those carrots and sticks exist in the Prime Minister's Office I am afraid that amendments to the standing orders such as those contemplated by this committee will not be sufficient.

For that reason I would like to empower directly the people through measures such as citizen initiated referenda, where the people could bring forward measures for the consideration of this parliament and the electorate as a whole which government or the legislature is unwilling or unable to consider itself. That, I think, would also be an effective check and balance against the increasing centralization of political power in the hands of the courts, a matter which is of grave concern to myself and my colleagues as well.

The Deputy Speaker: There being no further members rising, pursuant to order made Thursday, March 15, the motion is deemed adopted.

(Motion agreed to)

The Deputy Speaker: Accordingly the House stands adjourned until later this day at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24.

(The House adjourned at 1.40 a.m.)

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