



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

PROC • NUMBER 031 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, April 21, 2005

—
Chair

The Honourable Don Boudria

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.)): Order, please. We do have a quorum, colleagues.

I have just one information item before we start with today's business, if you don't mind. The subcommittee on private members' business of our standing committee has presented its report, and it's only an information item—that's why I mention it—because it's not recommending that any items be deleted. Therefore, I inform you so that I can table it in the House at the earliest opportunity. That disposes of this item.

Colleagues, this morning's meeting is for the consideration of the motion that was tabled before this committee at our last meeting, which I guess would have been the meeting of April 19.

I understand that our clerk has worked on the wording of the motion, pursuant to what we said then. Is it the wish of the committee that I reread the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

A voice: Do we have a written copy?

The Chair: Yes, we have copies of the motion that will be distributed as I read it. The motion reads as follows:

That, given the official opposition supply day was cancelled by the government yesterday, April 18,

—these wordings are now slightly out of date, but that's the motion—

the committee give the House the opportunity to hold the government to account by recommending that Standing Order 81(10) be amended by adding:

“(d) For the Supply period ending no later than June 23, 2005, if the government has not designated any of the remaining 6 allotted days so that an opposition motion can be considered on or before May 18, 2005, that May 19, 2005, shall be so designated, and if a recorded division is demanded on May 19, 2005, the vote shall not be deferred beyond the ordinary hour of daily adjournment on that day.”;

That, on May 30, 2005, this new section (d) of Standing Order 81(10) shall lapse and be withdrawn; and

That the committee instruct the Chair to table this report on Friday, April 22, 2005.

So that's the motion that is before us.

Someone was speaking when we adjourned the other day.

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): I just want to make one grammatical change.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Hill.

Mr. Jay Hill: As you pointed out, the opening sentence has the words “was cancelled by the government yesterday”; I would change “yesterday” to read “Monday, April 18,” if that's acceptable.

The Chair: Is everybody okay with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): I have a point of order on the motion.

The Chair: Okay, but could we just deal with this amendment first, please, if you don't mind?

Hon. Judi Longfield: I thought we just agreed to it.

The Chair: And we'll change the French text in a similar way. Now it no longer reads “yesterday”; it reads “Monday”.

Ms. Longfield, is this a point of order? There's already someone who is speaking, unless that's—

Hon. Judi Longfield: Well, it is. If we're changing the motion and making it correct, the supply day wasn't cancelled. It was deferred, delayed, whatever, but it wasn't cancelled. We don't have the ability to cancel any opposition days. The House leader only has the ability to delay or postpone.

•(1110)

The Chair: Well, of course, that's in the Standing Orders. But I'm not debating how accurate the motion is; I'm just trying to make it correct here in terms of the timing.

Hon. Judi Longfield: Well, I think it's—

The Chair: That's a substantive change, and of course one can propose any amendment that one likes. I agree that we unanimously decided to replace the word “yesterday” with “Monday”. This has no substantive effect.

Are you moving an amendment?

Hon. Judi Longfield: I'm just suggesting that if Mr. Hill wants to be totally accurate in putting this forward—I mean, he'll do what he wants—it wasn't cancelled, and I think the record should show it wasn't cancelled. It was delayed, it was deferred, it was postponed, but it wasn't cancelled.

The Chair: It can't be cancelled, of course. Anyone who knows the Standing Orders knows that.

Hon. Judi Longfield: It goes to his credibility if he's going to use the word “cancelled” when we know that it can't be.

The Chair: Mr. Hill, I think that's addressed to you.

Mr. Jay Hill: I have no urge to change this, Mr. Chair, because I don't want to get into an argument about whether I should get out a dictionary and describe what cancelled means. The opposition day was supposed to be yesterday, Wednesday, it didn't happen, and I conclude that means it was cancelled.

The Chair: As I said, it's just a substantive change here. Moving an amendment like that is in order, if that's what someone wants to do, but I gather no one has moved such an amendment.

We were listening to the speech of Madame Boivin when we adjourned.

[*Translation*]

Had you completed your comments, Ms. Boivin?

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): If Mr. Guimond insists, I will start over again. I had reached the time I was 11 years old, in my youth. No, let me be serious for a moment, I had completed my comments.

The Chair: Does anyone else wish to speak?

Mr. LeBlanc.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I have had a brief discussion with Messrs. Hill and Guimond. We do not intend to drag this matter out much longer. We would be prepared to vote as soon as I have made a few comments to explain how we, on the government side, view what happened earlier this week. I will try to make my comments as constructive and positive as possible.

[*English*]

Mr. Chairman, before us is a motion that amends the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, albeit temporarily. It is an amendment set to expire on a certain date, but nonetheless an amendment. Others have more experience here than I have, but our research indicates that past changes to the Standing Orders have been adopted by consultation among all the parties and in many cases, if not all the cases, by the consent of all the parties. In the last three Parliaments, where the governing party had a majority of seats in the House of Commons, had the government imposed rule changes, even temporary ones, without the consent of the minority side of Parliament, the opposition parties, with or without prior consultation—one can make changes by voting that may not have consent, but nonetheless there had been a consultation, and the chairman was a House leader for much of that time—I think we would have heard a very vicious reaction from opposition parties, and understandably so. In a corporate law context it would be the tyranny of the majority shareholders over the minority shareholders and it would end up in lawsuits.

[*Translation*]

Michel Guimond and I may have made money as a result of legal procedures in the past. Nevertheless, it is interesting, if you are a minority shareholder in a company, to think of the right you have with respect to the majority.

[*English*]

Today, Mr. Chairman, the three parties representing a majority of the House of Commons are imposing on the minority members changes in the Standing Orders that one might conclude are intended to satisfy a narrow or opportunistic political calculation of the moment.

Mr. Chairman, opposition days, known as supply days, fall under the rubric of government orders. The government has an obligation to allocate a certain number of supply days before the end of June or the relevant supply period. The opposition is now attempting to dictate what particular days should be allocated as supply days. The government does not attempt to impose, for example, when and how private members' bills or motions are handled; this is done by the Standing Orders, as established over a long time of parliamentary practice. Had a government in a majority circumstance attempted to impose changes on Standing Orders administering private members' business, again I think we could imagine the reaction of opposition parties.

I would also point out, Mr. Chairman, that when the government House leader postponed the opposition day that had been tentatively scheduled for yesterday, no rules were broken; there were no questions of privilege raised, there were no points of order. I think what the government House leader did was entirely within the rules and the Standing Orders of the House of Commons.

●(1115)

There have been previous instances when the Standing Orders have been changed. Some members here were involved with the modernization committee reports, for example, in June 2001 and June 2003. When those modernization reports were adopted and some of the Standing Orders were consequently changed, it was done unanimously; the consent of all the parties was required. What the rule changes currently demonstrate, in our view, is that the opposition, because they have, combined, a majority of seats, are imposing on the government decisions with respect to government orders. There was no indication that the government had anything but the intention to allocate the appropriate number of allotted days within the supply period, but now we see that this motion would in fact determine what days would be designated under government orders as opposition supply days.

Mr. Chair, I'll conclude by pointing out that in the House of Commons over the last number of days, for a few weeks perhaps—they're debating now, I understand, a concurrence motion with respect to the report of the agriculture and agri-food committee—these motions to concur in committee reports are in fact delaying what government business is before the House. Again, Mr. Chair, if the government had decided to routinely move concurrence motions in committee reports during opposition days, which begin with routine proceedings, if during a previous supply day we had moved concurrence reports and taken up three hours of the House's time, I can imagine what might have been some of the reaction.

That I think summarizes from my perspective and those of my colleagues, with whom we've had some conversations, some of our concerns about what we're doing. This is unprecedented. I think we're setting the stage for a future minority Parliament whereon, through committee reports and in the committee process, opposition parties can now bring forward similar motions with the effect of determining government business outside the Standing Orders or changing the Standing Orders to achieve that. Again, I would note that in the motion of Mr. Hill, if there ultimately is a supply day on May 19, the government does not have the ability, which we do in every other context, to defer the vote for a certain number of days, as prescribed in the rules. So this motion determines that the vote will in fact be at the conclusion of that day, whereas in every other context there has been the ability of the government to defer those votes.

[*Translation*]

That is a summary of my concerns, Mr. Chairman. I have stated them in a spirit of openness, in order to present the government's point of view. We think this is an unprecedented situation. We think that if we were to do that, we would be setting a precedent that could cause problems for a future Parliament. So that sums up my remarks. Perhaps my colleagues would like to add something. We are ready to vote and move on to something else.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. LeBlanc.

[*English*]

Are we ready for the question?

Mr. Hill.

Mr. Jay Hill: I'd love to have the question, Mr. Chair, but I feel that what the honourable parliamentary secretary has said requires at least some rebuttal.

I admit that this is an extraordinary action. I don't think there's any question about that. But I think it's ridiculous for the parliamentary secretary to suggest that the action taken by his government House leader on Monday night, at one minute to six, to cancel the opposition day to be held on Wednesday was not unprecedented.

To my knowledge, it was certainly the first time in the 12 years I've been here that an opposition day was cancelled at the last minute, on the basis of the motion itself. I mean, it wasn't some procedural thing; it wasn't that there was some conflict, some exterior problem that created a necessity for the government to postpone, or delay or whatever, the opposition's day. It was cancelled with no indication of when it would be restored, and there is still no indication; hence the need for this motion. So let's be very clear about that. It was cancelled because of the motion itself.

The very fact that the opposition parties—all three of our opposition parties—have those days is a fundamental cornerstone of democracy. We must have those days in order to hold a government in check and to hold them accountable. It's the basis of our democracy that the opposition have a set number of days that are to be used for the opposition's motions, and we do put forward motions. As long as they're in order, as long as the Clerk of the House of Commons and the Speaker find them to be in order, we get to debate them on those days. It's not up to the government to decide whether

they like or dislike our motion. They can do that once it's on the floor of the House of Commons, and then they can vote against it, the same as we can make those choices in voting against or supporting government legislation.

So to suggest that somehow, as the government House leader has done—to my colleague's credit, he hasn't—this was some sneaky or underhanded way to gain control or take control away from the government.... It was merely to get, as a worst-case scenario, one of our opposition days by May 19.

Obviously, Mr. Chair, you've read the motion. You just read it again for the committee—that if the government gives us our supply day, as I've asked the government House leader to give it to us this week, as we were supposed to have it this week, we could get back to being cooperative and working together in this Parliament, as we have in the past.

The parliamentary secretary talks about unprecedented action. This party, the official opposition in this Parliament, took the unprecedented step of abstaining. It's never been done in the history of Parliament or in the history of our country that the official opposition has abstained on a budget. We did that, because we knew the other two parties were already voting non-confidence in the government. You'll hear from them that maybe they didn't mean to, or whatever, but they were voting non-confidence in the government the day the budget vote took place.

Our party abstained to ensure the survival of this Parliament. That we would take an unprecedented step, under the guidance of our leader, Stephen Harper, to abstain, is how badly we want to make this Parliament work. I would certainly dispute that we haven't tried our best to make this Parliament work.

I want to raise one other issue, which I think is central to the parliamentary secretary's statement today. He has said that somehow this is tyranny of the majority over the minority. In this case, once all three opposition parties agree on a certain course of action, the Liberal Party of Canada is the minority in this House of Commons. Even I can count, Mr. Chair. Obviously that's true.

But I would dispute that the Liberal government—and I would ask the parliamentary secretary to address this—had some issues, in past Parliaments, about the use of report stage amendments. The opposition utilized that process at that time as one of the few delaying tools that were left open to us, to delay the passage of a bill.

• (1125)

The subsequent government brought in Motion No. 2 on February 26, 2001, roughly four years ago, to amend the Standing Orders regarding the use of report stage amendments, what would be in order and what wouldn't be in order.

I know you know this, Mr. Chair, because you follow House rules and procedures very closely.

The very next day—and you probably remember this as well, Mr. Chair, because both of us were there—it brought in closure on that standing order and rammed it down the throats of the opposition. So it is wrong for the parliamentary secretary to suggest today that the Liberal Party of Canada has not used their majority in the past to make changes to Standing Orders to take away one of the few tools that the opposition parties still possess in our Parliament to delay passage of bills.

Now, I think what we're dealing with here is very clear. Our impression is that we are not stalling government business. Is the parliamentary secretary suggesting that we shouldn't have a debate, even a three-hour debate, on hepatitis C, and pass a unanimous motion? That came about because of the process he is now criticizing. Is he suggesting that it was somehow wrong to pass that last night? Is he suggesting that it's wrong or a waste of time to address the plight of the aboriginal peoples, as we did with the recent concurrence motion on residential schools and the tragedy that took place there?

Yes, we're using concurrence motions. I would ask the parliamentary secretary—he was there, at the House leaders meeting, on Tuesday afternoon—to look at the order of business that his House leader presented to all opposition House leaders and whips at our weekly House leaders meeting. I would ask him to look at that. Look at the list of bills. I can't speak for the other two parties, but our party supports almost all of those bills, with the exception of concerns about the omnibus budget bill, Bill C-43, and Bill C-38, which is before the House currently. Obviously our party is opposed to that, although we are allowing a free vote. We've had members speak in favour of that legislation, but as a party we're opposed to it. The other exception is, I think, Bill C-44, which I think is still at committee.

Other than those, all of those bills that are before the House are supported by the official opposition, as has been the majority of government legislation introduced since last fall. So for the parliamentary secretary to somehow suggest that we're stalling, we're delaying government business....

On the concurrence motions we have been debating, most of them have been passing. They've had the support of all three opposition parties. Despite our sometimes philosophical differences, we've been unified on many of those concurrence motions. Those are concurrence motions of tremendous value to the Canadian people. It's a way in which we can bring forward motions, have a three-hour debate and a vote, and drive at least some issues to resolution in this Parliament.

I'll just end there, Mr. Chair. I'm certainly ready for the question, unless some of my colleagues, at least one from each of the other two parties, has something further to say on this particular motion.

I feel that the government House leader does have the power to cancel our day. Nobody is disputing that. That's why there were no points of order or points of privilege. He was within his rights to do that. But I think cancelling it based upon the motion itself would have to leave the impression that somehow it is the government's prerogative to decide whether they like or don't like an opposition motion. I think that strikes at the heart of democracy. We cannot

have that. It's up to us to decide what motion we will debate on our opposition days.

The government also has the power, hence the need for a motion like this, to delay the six remaining days to the last six days of the supply period in June, should they so choose, rather than have what traditionally has happened, where roughly once a week or once every 10 days you have an opposition day. They have the power to do that, we know that, and hence the need for this motion.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hill

I still have a number of speakers. I want to remind you that the committee does have other business later. However, we have a motion before us, and obviously we must consider that first.

Next on my list, if I go across the floor as is normally our custom, is Madam Longfield.

Hon. Judi Longfield: I won't take a long time. I just think, in response to Mr. Hill's comments about debating issues such as hepatitis C and committee reports, the Standing Orders provide for that. They provide for concurrence motions and they provide for three hours' debate. So to suggest that somehow you had to use unusual methods to get that.... That was negotiated by House leaders; it's in there. We think it's appropriate, and it should be allowed to happen.

What happened with the motion—

Mr. Jay Hill: He was saying it was inappropriate.

Hon. Judi Longfield: No, I didn't say—

Mr. Jay Hill: No, he was.

Hon. Judi Longfield: Okay, well, I don't think it's inappropriate. I'm agreeing. It's called for in the Standing Orders. That's what the Standing Orders are there for, to provide those kinds of opportunities. They're not always in the interests of the governing party, but they're negotiated in the spirit of getting along.

I would just suggest that the motion that was put forward, your motion for opposition day, was really quite extraordinary. I think that supply day motions are there to discuss issues of policy. We are political, and issues of policy should be strongly debated, heatedly debated. I think there have been a number of opposition motions, quite frankly, that really quite disgusted me when I saw them. But they were policy issues, and that's what we're here to discuss.

I think on issues of procedure, if something makes a Parliament dysfunctional, that's when a group of people can sort of bypass what has been a longstanding, appropriate tradition of discussing matters of procedure together in the spirit of cooperation and collegiality and a little bit of give and take. Again, the governing party doesn't always win, but I think it's appropriate.

We have to understand that this motion today and the proposed motion for the supply day fundamentally go against everything that we are here to do—to make Parliament work, to work in the spirit of cooperation and collegiality. It's a longstanding tradition. There are certain things we've always done—the Standing Orders, the Board of Internal Economy. Even this committee has never acted in a partisan fashion. We've dealt with issues that are procedural in the spirit of doing that.

This is going to come back to bite the next minority government. Someone said to me once, “Do unto others as you expect them to do unto you”, and at some point, another group of people in a minority situation are going to do the same thing. I guess it will be interesting to see how you respond at this point.

I think we've set a very, very dangerous precedent, one that I think all parties are going to look back on with great disgust and dismay. However...

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much, Madam Longfield.

Are there more MPs wishing to...? Mr. Casey.

[*Translation*]

Just a moment, we have to change parties.

It is your turn, Mr. Guimond.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): I would like to say, at the outset, that I agree with what Mr. Hill said. I listened carefully to what Mr. LeBlanc had to say.

In the British parliamentary system, which we have here in the Parliament of Canada, there are some important rules based on fair-play. Many things are dealt with through discussions, handshakes, the giving of one's word, on gentlemen's agreements. There are many unwritten things we discuss and that we settle on a friendly basis.

These rules are based on cooperation, collaboration, coordination and concertation. The four words I chose to use all begin with the prefix “co”. When we analyze the words “collaboration”, “comprehension”, “cooperation” and “coordination”, we see that they all contain the prefix “co”, which assumes a relationship involving two parties.

You anglophones have a nice expression: it takes two to tango. You can dance the tango alone in front of a mirror, but it does not work out all that well.

Once this relationship is broken, many things can be called into question. Yes, I agree with Mr. LeBlanc and Ms. Longfield that this is an exceptional measure. However, if we read the wording of Mr. Hill's motion, we see that it contains a time limit. This means that, as of May 30, the exceptional measure ceases to exist. That said, I cannot deny that this is an exceptional measure, but it is in response to the action taken by the Government House Leader.

I do not want to get into an argument of the following type: “He started it. I am just responding. My dad is stronger than yours. I root for the Canadians and you root for some other hockey team.” I do not want to get into considerations of that type. At the last minute, at 5:59 p.m., the Government House Leader decided to do something to

block an opposition day, the subject of which he had found out from some journalists or from speculation—at least according to what he told us. As Mr. Hill said, he was entitled to take this step as Government House Leader. That has never been questioned. We never raised this as a question of privilege with the Speaker. He decided to take this step. However, he is going to have to live with the consequences of his decision.

Earlier, I was speaking about the rules of fair-play and about gentlemen's agreements. Mr. LeBlanc quoted you, Mr. Chairman, and you were Government House Leader when there was a majority government. However, I would challenge you, Mr. Chairman. There is a meeting during which we build consensus: that is the House Leaders' meeting, which takes place every Tuesday, at 3:30 p.m. Despite the fact that you had a majority, you tried to reach a consensus among the opposition parties at these meetings at the time. You knew that with your majority, you could function to some extent.

● (1135)

At many meetings and discussions, agreements are reached through unanimous consent. If one party or an independent decides not to give its consent, to some extent Parliament can become, if not paralyzed, at least disrupted.

At the House Leaders' meeting, Mr. Valeri, the Government House Leader gave us a program for the next three weeks which showed, in black and white, that Wednesday, April 20, would be an opposition day for the Conservative Party of Canada and that Thursday, May 5, would be an opposition day for the NDP. We proceeded, in good faith, on the basis of this program.

As you might expect, the Conservatives worked on the wording of their opposition day motion. Under the Standing Orders, they have to present the text by 6:00 p.m., 48 hours before the opposition day. They were working to comply with this requirement.

At the last minute, the Government House Leader decided to postpone the opposition parties' right to have opposition days. This is the only chance the opposition has to be “in charge”, so to speak, and to decide what will be on the agenda for that day. All the rest of the time, the government is free to table bills whenever it likes, to mothball another bill for as many days, weeks or months as it likes, or to let a bill die at the end of a Parliament, as has happened with many bills. That is how government works.

Opposition parties have opposition days to highlight subjects that are part of their political platform. I hope no one has forgotten that we are in politics. We are in politics, we are not in a cloistered institution or in a religious community.

I will close on this, because I do not want to repeat Ms. Redman's filibuster. The problem is that the government has not accepted the democratic verdict delivered by the population at the election on June 28, 2004. On June 28, 2004, the people of Canada said, in all the provinces, except Quebec, that it wanted a minority liberal government, that they therefore wanted the opposition parties to outnumber the government. The Liberal Party forms the government, but it is a minority government.

This government is still behaving as it behaved before, because it probably picked up too many bad habits since 1993 and since the beginning of the century, and probably this will change. The government is behaving as though it were still a majority. I can give you some examples.

When there were discussions about the Speech from the Throne, the Prime Minister got in touch with the opposition party leaders at 11:55 p.m., not at five minutes to six, like Tony Valeri, but at the very last minute. He contacted them at the last minute. Even then, the first time that everything could have collapsed, he came to consult the opposition parties to try to get their agreement on the Speech from the Throne. The opposition parties were not consulted in any way with respect to the budget.

The government is refusing to acknowledge that it is in a minority situation. It made the decision that this is its budget, and we had nothing to say about it. Fortunately, the Conservatives decided to remain seated. That was their decision. History will judge them and the voters will judge them. It is not up to me to comment on their decision to remain seated when the budget was tabled. If they had stood up, the government would have been defeated. They have their strategy, and it is not up to me to question it.

Once again, the purpose of this exceptional measure to demonstrate to the government that we are looking for a way of responding to the step it took. It is unfortunate that we have to play these cat and mouse games, to play with the rules of procedure to try to get around the action taken by the other party.

• (1140)

If the government did not want a motion like this, all it had to do was give the Conservatives their opposition day yesterday, Wednesday, April 20. If that had happened, no motion to amend the Standing Orders would have been presented.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Guimond.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Julian.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is true that we are dealing with an unprecedented situation with this motion, but we're also dealing with an unprecedented situation this week. There has never been a minority Parliament where these kinds of actions have been taken by the government, what I consider to be thuggish actions taken at the last minute, with no consultation and no discussion.

These games are being played procedurally in the House, and they started, as we know, a few weeks ago with the CEPA amendment to the budget implementation bill. So what we are seeing progressively are games being played in Parliament.

A few moments ago, one of the members opposite compared Parliament to a corporate boardroom and the question of majority and minority shareholders. Perhaps that's the root of the problem: if the government sees this as some sort of corporate boardroom rather than the very bastion of Canadian democracy, we have a

fundamental problem, because the reality is that Canadians out there on main streets across the country expect action. They are seeing growing homelessness, the post-secondary education crisis, the deteriorating environment, and credit card medicine. We're seeing all these issues that the people of Canada expect us to debate and discuss in Parliament, and at the same time we have the government shutting down what is one of the only, or most important, mechanisms that opposition parties have, opposition days, whereby the opposition chooses a subject to debate and discuss that we opposition members have the responsibility to press the government on. To say somehow that days at the end of June are acceptable, that the government can reschedule them and throw them in at the end of the session, is completely unacceptable.

There is a crisis of confidence, I would say. There's a crisis of confidence that goes far beyond what happened Monday night. We've seen it consistently, with the Air India inquiry and with the call from Parliament to have the dirty money that the Liberal Party has taken be paid back. We've had repeated calls or majority votes by this Parliament ignored or refused by this government.

[*Translation*]

We are here to make this Parliament work. However, it is becoming less and less clear that the government wants this Parliament to do its work.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Would anyone on this side like to add something? I turn then to the opposition side.

Mr. Casey, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): There are just a couple of comments that I couldn't let go by.

I find the arguments by the Liberals fascinating. Madam Longfield said we were setting a dangerous precedent, but we're just reacting to a dangerous precedent. When they cancelled our opposition day, I don't know what they expected us to do—lie down and not do anything? Then another comment she made was "Do unto others...". That's what's happening here: the Liberals set the tone and established the change from precedent.

My very distinguished neighbour, Mr. LeBlanc, said right off the bat that no rules have been broken. Nobody accused him of breaking rules, but he said he wanted to make it very clear that no rules have been broken. The Liberals are being accused of breaking rules in lots of other cases, but we are not accusing them of breaking rules here. At the same time, we're not breaking rules, but following the rules with this motion.

I just wanted to make those points clear. The only reason we're here is that the Liberals broke with tradition when they cancelled our opposition day with one minute's notice.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Reid, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

I'm responding to Mr. LeBlanc's comments. All the rules in this House and all of our unwritten conventions, including the conventions of consultation between party House leaders, have been established to back up a single principle—responsible government in Canada. We all know this. We were all taught in school that the history of Canada is largely the history of gaining responsible government. But we have to remember what responsible government means.

Technically speaking, responsible government means that the government is responsible to the House of Commons—or at the provincial level to the legislative assembly. That's what responsible government is. The House of Commons demonstrates its power to require this responsibility by having the capacity to defeat the government. The House of Commons is a confidence chamber. This is the most fundamental tenet of our entire system of government. If you take it away, we no longer have a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. We have something else.

The government seems to have forgotten this basic principle of how we govern ourselves. You can see this in the parliamentary secretary's comment that the Liberals are like minority shareholders whose interests have to be protected. I understand the value of protecting minorities when we're talking about constitutions. That's what our constitution is for. That's why we designate different categories of minorities that no one can discriminate against. But that's not what the House of Commons is about, and that is why the House of Commons and the charter are separate in our system.

We have a system of majoritarian parliamentary rule. It's the majority that must always be sovereign in the House of Commons. That doesn't mean that a minority government can't function. It means that on any given vote the government must get a majority of support. This support can come from the Conservative Party or the Bloc. It can come in a variety of different forms. But the government always needs to have a majority.

If the government creates a situation in which votes that involve confidence are not permitted, the government is effectively suspending or cancelling the idea of responsible government and replacing it with a new system of minority rule. In other words, we are subverting the very basis on which Canada's parliamentary democracy is founded.

This is the unprecedented action this government has taken, and the government continues to take this action. The government has developed the idea that our rules are subject to change whenever they seem inconvenient for the Liberal Party of Canada.

That's what the government House leader was doing when he stood up with one minute left and suggested an alternative to the normal and traditional functioning of Parliament. This alternative would create a situation in which confidence votes can't happen, in which the House of Commons is no longer sovereign over the government and the government is no longer responsible to the House of Commons. This is wrong. This is the reason this motion is before our committee, the reason it should soon be before the House.

This wrongheadedness continues. Today we find that the Prime Minister has decided to abandon Parliament altogether and address the nation directly, presumably on the assumption that he won't have to face an opposition if he goes through the media. He wants to bypass the media filter, the opposition, and the option of commentary. Why? Because the normal rules aren't working out his way. Breaking the rules, changing the rules whenever it's inconvenient to follow them, is not the way in which our government operates. That is what makes us different from all those countries that lack responsible chambers and that lack the capacity to require the government to face the voters whenever it has lost the democratically elected legislative assembly of that country.

It's on this basis, Mr. Chairman, that this motion has come forward.

Thank you very much.

• (1150)

The Chair: Okay.

Are there more speakers, or are we ready for the vote?

Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is clear that this is a very important motion. Our party intends to support it.

Two days ago, the Chief Whip of the Liberals made a speech. It started at 11:00 a.m. and ended at 2:00 p.m. It was a complete inventory of all the good things the Liberals have done for us and all the fine work they have done. One might have thought that Canada belongs to them.

Today, we have a government that has become dysfunctional, and this must be said. As my colleague, Peter Julian, was saying earlier, for our part, we are trying to make it work. Although the Liberals think they are doing the same, they are not succeeding. I will give you some examples.

You know that ever since I was elected, there is one issue that has been very dear to my heart: employment insurance. I travelled around the country and visited the 10 provinces and the Northwest Territories. I went to 22 cities and attended 52 meetings in 30 days in all parts of Canada. Canadian workers told us unanimously that changes had to be made to the EI system.

Under the minority government, committees were set up to study the new EI system in order to make some changes. In Mr. Guimond's riding, on the North Shore of Quebec, 2,500 workers gathered in the street, including a young retired priest. The demonstration had started in the church. The priest had announced that they were going to ask the person at the back to help them in their efforts to get the federal government to make some changes to employment insurance. This is no longer just a political problem in Canada; it has also become a human problem. Workers are losing their jobs. I was in Forestville. I found something very powerful about the fact that the community mobilized. It was not just the workers, but also some people in business.

In my riding, I get phone calls from people who want to kill themselves. In my region, the suicide rate is on the rise. And what are the Liberals doing? They are making minimal changes. In fact, they are trying to blackmail us and convince us that if there is an election, no changes will be made to the system. Stop blackmailing us you Liberals, and make the changes that are required! A budget was tabled in the House of Commons recently. Actually, some changes were announced, but they were not included in the budget, but rather were announced in a press release put out by the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. One of the changes involved the best 14 weeks.

That is where our democracy is deficient. People do talk about democracy. Members of Parliament on the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development made some recommendations to the government, particularly to consider the best 12 weeks.

Dominic LeBlanc, the Member of Parliament for Beauséjour, knows this. I was not here when he made his fine speech about the proper functioning of democracy and Parliament. He said he was pleased about the best 14 weeks rule. I can understand him, because in his riding, people are fortunate enough to be able to work for 17 or 18 weeks.

On the radio, people dare say that it will never be possible to satisfy Yvon Godin, that he will always want more. The fact is that it is not about satisfying Yvon Godin, but rather the workers, those in Acadian peninsula, in Madawaska, in the Gaspé region, in Forestville and in Newfoundland. These people have sounded the alarm. How can the Liberals boast about the proper functioning of Parliament when they ignore this call for help?

I remember the first time Georges Farrah, the former member of Parliament for Bonaventure—Gaspé—Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Pabok, attended a meeting of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development. That was in the year 2000. He was on the government side. Jane Stewart, the minister of the day, appeared before the committee. And what did Mr. Farrah say at that time? He made a heart-felt plea to the minister to make changes to the EI system because people in his region were suffering.

•(1155)

The changes were not made. What happened to Georges Farrah? He lost his seat because of that. I challenge anyone to tell me that is not what happened. That is exactly what happened. These changes did a lot of damage. A \$46 billion surplus was taken from employment insurance. The surplus was used to balance the budget and pay down the government's debt. Paying down the debt, paying

off the deficit—all of this was done at the expense of the workers who lost their jobs.

If the Liberals think they have done such a good job, why did the people from my area turf out Douglas Young, who was the Minister for Human Resources Development and who had made changes to employment insurance? Why was Yvon Godin elected with 40 per cent of the votes in 1997, with 46 per cent in 2000 and with 53.8 per cent in 2004? It is because the Liberals did not keep their promises. Colleagues like Dominic LeBlanc told the voters that a vote for the Liberal Party was a vote for change. When the opportunity for change arises, they say that they will never be able to satisfy the voters. Mr. LeBlanc was satisfied in his riding. Canadians have had enough, Mr. Chairman.

The Liberals just do not get it. This week, I had a call from the mayor of Bathurst. There used to be a National Defence recruitment centre in Bathurst. Five people worked there, serving the north-eastern and northwestern parts of New Brunswick, as far as Miramichi. They decided to change the boundaries. The office now serves a sector that goes from Moncton to Dalhousie. After being located in Bathurst for 50 years, the office was moved to Miramichi, which is a Liberal riding. This is shameful. People are fed up with these political manoeuvres. You act that way, then you preach democracy and brag about being a good political party.

My father was a Liberal all his life. I am the 11th child in our family and the first one to leave that gang, for the simple reason that I had had enough of Liberal politics, of the way they hold people hostage.

They are now taking people hostage with the budget. How many times did they ask the opposition in the House of Commons, over the past few weeks, to vote on the entire budget? It was denied. The opposition wants to proceed stage by stage.

In a minority government, some things can be dealt with separately, for example, the agreements with Newfoundland-and-Labrador and Nova Scotia. The Liberals are not at all flexible. They think that they have a majority government, and they do not want to give an inch to the opposition. They should remember that the opposition holds the majority.

What is wrong with introducing a non-confidence motion? The Liberals did it early in the Joe Clark government. He was only in office for nine months. He wanted to increase the price of gas by 14¢, and he was kicked out by the Liberals. I remember it well, even though I was young at the time. However, Trudeau was re-elected, and introduced a 40¢ increase. He played quite a trick on Canadians. I am sure, Mr. Chairman, that you remember these events in our history.

This is our position. The NDP provides the government with examples on a daily basis in the House of Commons. What do we do when our hospitals close, when people are in the hallways? I remember having often said, in the House of Commons, that you do not see dogs and cats in the hallway of the veterinarian's office. However, in hospitals, we see the elderly and children in the corridors, because of the cuts that have been made to health care since 1994. We are paying the price for that now.

People have had enough. A fellow who was never interested in politics before gave me a call this week to tell me that he was watching the Gomery inquiry. It was 2:00 a.m., and he could not go to bed. When he finally did go to bed, he could not sleep all night, because he was so mad. He works hard, he pays his taxes, and he did not realize that was how things worked in Ottawa.

What has happened to us? Politicians, like myself, all pay the same price. When it comes to respect, we are at the bottom of the heap. That is not normal in a democratic country like ours, a country that I think is the most beautiful in the world. I have travelled to a number of countries, but I have never seen a situation that is worse than the one towards which we are now heading.

The best thing that the Prime Minister could do would be to speak to the nation from Parliament this evening, out of respect. He will not have to use taxpayers' money to pay for the technical and broadcast crews. He could do it in the House, and it would be free. He could tell the nation that he will be setting up a trust fund to which he will contribute, and he will govern the country along with the opposition.

• (1200)

But that is not what he is doing, he wants to hang on to power. It is unfortunate to see such actions in a democracy like ours.

I am appealing to the Liberals to start to think about the consequences of their actions. It is true that the Canadian people do not want an election, but what price will have to be paid in order to avoid it? That is the question that we must ask.

As I said, every day we ask questions about the Kyoto Protocol when everyone else is talking about the scandal. We ask why this money is not going to the environment, to health care or to education. The children in our schools represent the future of our country. However, they will be running up a debt of \$40,000 to \$50,000 in four years. Why is nobody working on that?

This blaming the opposition for preventing the government from implementing the budget has to stop. That is not the case; the opposition has created an opening to pass the budget. Once again, the Liberals want to use blackmail: they are telling the people that if they do not vote for them, the budget will not be implemented and no money will be available for hospitals, for education or for day care. They are threatening the people in Beauséjour, telling them that if they do not vote Liberal, they will lose the 14 weeks best rule.

People have had enough of this blackmail. This is 2005. The Prime Minister himself said that he wanted more democracy in Ottawa. As a newly-elected Prime Minister, he was going to bring in change, but he did exactly the opposite. Parliament adopts motions in the House of Commons. The mayor of Winnipeg, who ran for the Liberals, received an appointment. Parliament voted against having him as a member of the National Roundtable on the Environment and Sustainable Development. However, the Liberals ignored the will of the majority and proceeded to appoint him anyway.

This morning, I am telling you how I feel. I am doing this on behalf of the people from Acadie—Bathurst who are fed up with what is happening. They truly regret this turn of events. Even though the Liberals brag about the wonderful things that they have done,

they have harmed our country. That is all I wanted to say. However, you might still have a few weeks to redeem yourselves.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

[*English*]

I'm in the hands of the committee. More people have asked to speak. Unless someone withdraws their request to speak, I must recognize the next speaker.

Mr. Nicholson, you're next on my list.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

My comments, believe it or not, will actually be short. I did want to make a comment with respect to the discussion about concurrent motions. Apparently there was a bit of a disagreement as to how valuable these things are, or whether they are valuable.

It seems to me, Mr. Chairman, that what happened last night on that concurrence motion on the hepatitis C question is a perfect example of Parliament at its best and Parliament working well. My understanding was that this had come before Parliament before—I wasn't here at the time—and it did not get the support of the House of Commons. It was a motion or proposal to compensate all the victims of this tragedy. This was apparently opposed by the government when it had a majority; it didn't get its support. This motion came forward from one of my colleagues and apparently the members of the Liberal Party voted against it at the committee. And it's their right to do that. I disagree with it, but it was their right to do it.

Then when it came before the House of Commons there was approximately a three-hour debate, and I can tell you, I was quite pleased that the members of the government changed their minds. They are now in support of compensating all the people who have suffered from this tragedy.

Quite frankly, I wasn't expecting it. I had been told about their position in the past, and I was aware of their position at the committee. I was expecting the members of the Liberal Party to vote against it, but then they voted in favour, and it was unanimous. And I thought to myself that this was a great moment for the House of Commons; this is the majority, and indeed the unanimous will of the House of Commons, in support of something that I think is very good, something that is overdue. I thought that these concurrence motions are a great thing, a wonderful thing to have. These are not wastes of time or attempts to delay. But you know, Mr. Chairman, even if members want to delay, and certainly these concurrent motions are.... That too is the right within our parliamentary tradition.

Mr. Chairman, I bet you remember—going back perhaps twenty years—people in this chamber introducing a plethora of private members' bills and petitions that seemed to go on forever in the view of a government member watching what was happening. When I saw that years ago, I thought, well, that was the democratic process and the members have a right to introduce as many private members' bills as they want, as many petitions as they want, because that is the essence of democracy. I guess that's part of what is so disappointing about this whole discussion.

I heard the current Prime Minister say, about a year and a half ago, that his commitment to changing and fixing the democratic deficit.... I think those were his words. It wasn't a commitment, it wasn't a promise; it was reality. That's what he said: it was reality. That's what was going to take place in terms of making the House of Commons more effective and making members of Parliament more effective.

I would suggest to him and to the members opposite that just because they don't like the motion on the opposition day is not a reason to have it withdrawn. Even within the context of disliking it, what did it say? All it did was confirm the tradition in the House of Commons that on a regular basis the opposition parties will have their designated days, or their supply days. That's not too controversial. That is what takes place. On a regular basis we get these things, and that was what the Conservative motion was.

So it seems to me to be completely at odds with empowering the House of Commons and empowering members of Parliament to have that unilaterally withdrawn by the government. So that was disappointing.

I'm disappointed that Parliament is being bypassed this evening. Apparently the Prime Minister is speaking from his office. This crisis in the Liberal Party is purported to be some sort of a national crisis now, so he is speaking to the nation so it doesn't get filtered by the media or by opposition members. It's very disappointing and it seems to me again inconsistent with the stated view of the Prime Minister, which is to empower the members of Parliament and empower the House of Commons.

● (1210)

Mr. Chairman, it seems to me that this too is a reasonable motion. It's ultimately the democratic will if the majority of the people of this committee agree with it and if the majority of the people of the House of Commons agree with it. That is the tradition in the Westminster Parliament. The tradition of the Westminster Parliament is to not have the government or anybody else impose their will against the majority of the House of Commons. That too is disappointing if it's the position of the government, and it apparently is.

Those are my brief comments.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Does anyone else wish to speak?

Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Dale Johnston (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I won't make the mistake of saying that I'll be brief because I don't know whether I will be or not.

To add to what my colleague, the chief opposition whip, has said, I think that the motion was an opportunity for the government to confirm or deny their intention of lumping together all the opposition days right near the end of the session. As you know, Mr. Chairman, that is no later than June 23.

This was an opportunity for the government to have a debate on this motion and to vote in favour of the motion. In my opinion, it only confirmed the traditional calendar. The opportunity for opposition members to put forth a motion for debate for that supply period has traditionally been sprinkled throughout the calendar at more or less regular intervals.

I think this was an opportunity for the government to either confirm or deny that their intentions were to remove all of these supply days and lump them together right near the end of the session. Once they learned what the content of the motion was, in my mind, they basically confirmed that it was their intent because they cancelled our supply day on the basis of the content of the motion.

Mr. Chairman, all I want to say is that in my estimation, it has been confirmed that it was indeed their intention. Otherwise, they would have allowed this motion to go ahead and they would have voted in favour of it. By voting in favour of it, they would have said that yes, they will allow the traditional calendar to more or less proceed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Do other members wish to speak? If not, is the committee ready for the question?

A voice: Let's have the question.

The Chair: I believe there is a request already for a recorded vote. Mr. Clerk will read the names.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're not suspending. Please stick around. There's other business to be done by this committee. We will need approximately two minutes of suspension to allow the cameras to leave because we'll be sitting in camera to set the agenda.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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