

Q & A T O N Y V A L E R I

Minister, I assume that the two smaller parties would be interested in making changes to the standing orders so that the situation they're in now has some more permanence to it, let's say. The Conservatives may or may not see things that way—hoping to form a majority themselves one of these days. I wonder if you could tell us if you foresee any changes to the standing orders of Parliament?

There's actually been a lot of discussion about standing orders. In fact, I would say that if you recall right after the election and before Parliament resumed, we had the three leaders of the opposition essentially table a number of standing order changes that they all agreed on, and we've been working our way through that. One of them, if you recall, was a change in the standing order to define confidence, something which I was not able to support (I made that very clear right from the beginning).

But certainly there are a number of changes to the standing orders that we've already made. For instance, the deputy speaker was traditionally an appointment by the Prime Minister. It's now an opposition member, and the name was put forward by the opposition. The assistant deputy speakers were both put in place by the Prime Minister. But the opposition parties were given an opportunity to put forward names (and they did not—the smaller parties in particular did not). But those appointments were made in consultation with the opposition parties.

There are some changes with respect to debate and questions, that we have allowed more time for in the House of Commons. There are a number that are coming up with respect to how we deal with concurrence for committee reports when they come back to the house, and how we deal with that.

For instance, this probably is something that not a lot of people know, but opposition day motions, for instance, are unamendable except by the sponsor of the opposition day motion. Perhaps it made sense in a majority situation, but it no longer makes sense in a minority situation. In a majority situation, it was the one thing that the opposition party could put forward and know that they could see through the day unamended. In a minority situation that is no longer the case.

I foresee a number of changes to the standing orders, and certainly my objective in changing the standing orders would speak to the issue of voice: are members getting more opportunity for input? Is their voice in

the changes that we make? So I do see some changes in the standing orders. In fact, all three are looking for change.

There's some difference on the private members business, which is an interesting dynamic. If you recall in the last Parliament, all private members business became votable. It was a provisional change in the standing order, and I think that expires in the first 90 days of this parliament. So there is some discussion about how to deal with that, and there's a difference in the opposition parties on how to deal with it.

Some are concerned that every private member's bill is votable. I tried to understand at first, why there would be that concern, but I'm now understanding that some opposition parties or opposition members would like to put something on the floor of the House, perhaps worded in such a way that might engage debate, but would not want to see a vote on it, because people might not want to pronounce where they ultimately stand on something, and so it can be a little tricky, at times. So some of that is coming back in the dialogue between us.

Minister, I'd just like to state first I agree with your theory, and I'd just like to hear your comments about what you would plan to do when you run up against a guy like Premier Williams?

Keep talking—and lock the door.

But I do think, though, that's an interesting dynamic in the sense that, at the end of the day, people are looking for leaders to work things out. So I don't think that I would do anything different, except ensure that we get back to a table and hammer it out, and make sure that whatever we end up with is a win, and people understand the trade-offs and what the trade-offs might mean.

I am a firm believer that dialogue is what it's all about—it's all about collaboration. At the end of the day—and don't get me wrong—I have said some things that that other opposition House leaders may not have agreed with or liked. But we can continue the dialogue. I mean, it's my job to put forward a position, as it is their job, and we respect each other. I won't back away from saying what I need to say. But I also will not accept no dialogue, because I don't think that that serves anybody's purpose.

So if I can enter any type of relationship in the frame of collaboration, laying out my bottom lines, I think that we can bring people along. At the end of the day, that there has to be a goal and an objective that we all have. We might be wanting to reach it through different methods but we all have to buy into that one goal. I can tell you that at my first meeting with House leaders in this parliament, I chatted with them pretty well the way I'm speaking to you now.

The bottom line here is that there has to be an agreement to make parliament work, and that means a bunch of trade-offs on all sides. And if we're just saying that, and perhaps our actions might be different, this will be a very short lived parliament. I'm not prepared to just go along for the ride because we don't want to go to the Canadian people. I think people expect the parliament to work; it is our responsibility to make it work. So, actions and words need to be in lock step, and I think so far it's worked that way.

I'm not naive, I don't think it can work that way forever in this parliament because people will become entrenched in their positions along the way. But I think, so far is so good, and I think the approach is the right approach and I have to tell you that I think it's the right approach. People that have been in politics a lot longer than I have been in politics sometimes have trouble with the approach because they do think that you need to take the troops over the hill at any cost, because that's what it's about.

I think it's about Canadians. I think it's about voice, and I think it's about bringing people that have differing and opposing views together and coming out somewhere that is in the best interests of Canadians.

Deathbed conversions are often repudiated when the patient recovers. Should the government that is in semi-power today return to full power, do you think your initiatives will survive the recovery?

If I'm there, I would commit to yes, but there's no guarantee that I'll be there. I think the Prime Minister is very, very much committed to that type of approach. He talked about the approach prior to the election. During his leadership, the commitment to voice and the commitment to having parliament work.

It's interesting. I've been parliament since '93. Bob was there in '88. A lot of the members, and the opposition frankly, became very accustomed to Parliament working in the traditional way.

An interesting dynamic is in committees. You bring legislation to committees. In a majority situation, the opposition opposes because that's what the opposition does. You work through and amendment and at the end of the day, the government has the numbers—the government gets to decide. Even in instances where the opposition might agree, you would have an opposition member, in some cases a government member on a private members bill saying “you know what, I like the position. I think I could support that, but the party is not going to support it for the following reasons.”

The interesting dynamic in this minority government is that the opposition has the majority on committees. So the opposition can no

longer just take positions of opposing for the sake of opposing. When legislation comes out of committees, it comes out of committees as a result of the opposition party participating and voting in favour of this legislation.

So, the other point that I would just leave you with, is that in a minority situation, there is an enhanced responsibility on all members of Parliament, because we all have a greater role to play. Whether it's a majority or a minority situation, collaboration and responsibility—individual responsibility by Members of Parliament—I think, are greatly enhanced.

I think that majority governments returning to the House of Commons is a good thing. But I think majority governments need to be about collaboration. It's not just minority governments that need to be about collaboration.

I'd just like to leave you with that.