

Remarks to House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs as part of its mandate on Initiatives Toward a Family Friendly House of Commons, April 19, 2016

Thank you for the invitation to appear.

I expect I was invited because of an interview I gave questioning the idea of changing the parliamentary calendar to a four day week. In fact I think a good argument can be made for that change but I have not heard it so far in your deliberations.

You do not lose much by not sitting on Fridays. There are no votes in the House. Committees normally do not meeting. Few minister are in Question Period and many members are on their way to the airport before the House rises.

But the idea of taking Friday off has not been well received in the coverage I have seen in the media.

In 1982 I worked for the committee that brought in the first parliamentary calendar. It was 160 days which replaced an average of 175 days when parliament operated without a fixed calendar. The present version provides for a maximum of 135 days. But in the last decade the House has only sat as many as 129 days on one occasion. Many years it sat less than 100 days.

Put another way you have a calendar which at best provides for six months **on** and six months **off**.

If you came back earlier after Labour Day and after New Years and eliminated all but two break weeks (one in November and one for Easter) you could have a calendar of about 160 days with no Fridays.

I know members are unhappy when journalists or academics refer to break weeks as holidays and I know all of you work hard during these constituency weeks. But they are holidays from Parliament. -- They are holidays from holding the government to account. -- They are holidays from committee hearings.

The break weeks may be much loved particularly by Ministers who do not have to face question period. But I suggest there are three things wrong with them, aside from creating the erroneous impression that you are on holidays.

First, break weeks encourage obstruction because if the opposition can delay a bill until the Thursday before a break week they have stopped it for ten days or more. The result has been a dramatic increase in time allocation motions.

I think even the dreaded omnibus bills are partly due to the limited time that Parliament is sitting. If nothing changes I suspect that this government, despite its promises, will have to resort to both extensive time allocation and perhaps even omnibus bills before the Parliament is over.

Second, I think break weeks are really part of the permanent election campaign and a huge advantage to incumbents. They are essentially the importation of an American practice instituted because Congressmen are always looking for money for the next election. They use their break weeks for constant rounds of fund raising. We have a different system and different election financing laws.

I believe if constituency events and fundraising were focused on Fridays and the House met with fewer interruptions the result would be a more functional Parliament as well as a family friendly one.

Third, I think break weeks reflect a view of the member's role as a delegate who primarily represents the views of his or her constituents.

But there is a more traditional view of the role of an MP first articulated by Edmund Burke. He thought the role of a parliamentarian is to exercise his or her independent judgement on the public issues of the day. Of course the judgement is informed by views of constituents but in this age of communications and social media is it necessary to be in the riding in order to know the views of your constituents?

Finally regarding the calendar I think a good bit of family friendliness could be injected by simply using pairing which seems to have fallen into disuse. (Mentioned briefly by the Clerk last week but I think it bears repeating

A member on either the government or opposition side advises his or her whip about an unavoidable conflict. The whip calls his counterpart on the other side and an agreement is struck whereby one member from the other party will absent himself from the vote and this will be indicated in the journals as being paired.

I also have a few comments regarding Parallel secondary debating chambers. I do not have any great knowledge of dual chambers but I looked at the British Standing Orders and they appear to be used partly for what we call private members business and partly for questioning ministers.

In the Canadian context I could see a dual chamber used for specific debates. For example the budget debate could be split. Same for the throne speech debate.

Or parts of private member's business (excluding the vote) could be moved to the parallel chamber.

My real question is what are you trying to accomplish. If you are looking for ways for members to get their views on record you could accomplish this by allowing members to append their speeches to Hansard.

However if the purpose is to free up more House time for discussion of legislation I think there are better approaches. Why not limit second reading debate to one day? This sounds draconian but that is the practice in Britain.

After the minister introduces and gives reasons for supporting a bill and the opposition party critics give the reasons for opposing I think you only need a few more speeches by interested members and then the bill should go to committee.

There could be exceptions to a one day rule for bills which are matters of conscience and where members have a legitimate interest in putting forth personal views that differ from those of their party leaders.

Let me conclude with a couple of observations. In the last decade Parliament became the subject of many criticisms with "dysfunctional" being perhaps the most frequent adjective to describe our most important democratic institution. I

hope this new parliament will address some of the issues that led to these criticisms.

One such area is Question Period. I am not sure if a British style Prime Minister's Question Time is part of your mandate but I hope you can push it forward.

Another problem is non confidence motions because the timing is largely controlled by the government. That led to two unfortunate parliamentary incidents in the last decade and could easily be corrected by changes to the standing orders.

But I am getting away from purely family friendly issues so I will stop here and look forward to your questions.