

Liberals caught short on key bill; Speaker casts rare tie-breaking vote

The Liberal government's parliamentary game nearly failed a pop procedural test today when the Conservatives and NDP joined forces to force a vote while too many Liberals were away from the House.

The surprise vote on Bill C-10, which would amend existing law to allow Air Canada more flexibility on the location of its maintenance operations, was a stunningly close call for the government and a near-tactical disaster for government whip Andrew Leslie, a former Canadian Forces Lieutenant-General accustomed to rallying troops.

For just the 11th time in Canadian history, Speaker Geoff Regan cast the tie-breaking vote on a 139-139 count, well short of the government's 184-vote majority.

Government House Leader Dominic LeBlanc described the vote as "a stunt" and is warning he no longer plans to trust the opposition house leaders.

"It shows a level of immaturity and irresponsibility and we are going to have to then take precautions, including accepting their word as worth, frankly, not very much."

Meanwhile, New Democratic Party Leader Tom Mulcair accused the Liberals of being arrogant.

"I think it is the arrogance of the Liberals," Mulcair told reporters after question period. "They don't care. They just figure they are always going to win because they do have a large majority."

Mulcair said he saw cabinet minister Judy Foote running down the hallway trying to make it to the vote on time and Leslie panicking, trying to stall the vote as long as he could.

"All we know is it was important to stand up for those jobs," Mulcair said. Those are Canadian jobs that we're allowing to be shipped elsewhere and it is because the Liberals, including Liberal MPs from Quebec, don't care about our aeronautic sector like they should."

Critics of the bill have argued that the legislation would cost well-paid aviation jobs in Canada.

The bill, which was tabled by Transport Minister Marc Garneau on March 24, had made it out of committee unamended and was at report stage when the opposition triggered today's vote.

The tie vote came despite the fact that the Liberals have 184 MPs compared with 153 MPs for all of the opposition parties combined.

Speaking to reporters after the vote, Leslie conceded that the close call raised his blood pressure and described it as "a good lesson."

"Yes, it was a very close call. Too close, actually."

Leslie said a group of MPs were about 35 minutes from the Hill and got back a few minutes too late for the vote. Others were out of the country or at various events like funerals.

If it hadn't been for a miscommunication between the NDP and the Bloc Québécois, Bill C-10 could have been defeated then and there. NDP House Leader Peter Julian called the Bloc on

Saturday and suggested they talk Monday but because he didn't spell out the plans to trigger the vote only half of the Bloc's 10-member caucus was in Ottawa, said Bloc Leader Rhéal Fortin.

"Obviously if the Conservatives and the NDP had called us when they thought of that strategy and said 'Listen, it would be important for you to be there because we're going to vote Monday morning, we would have arranged to be there,'" Fortin told reporters.

Doug Eyolfson, Liberal MP from Winnipeg who opposes the bill, also helped save the government from embarrassment by voting with his fellow Liberals.

"Today's vote on C-10 was a procedural stunt by the opposition," he tweeted. "My vote at 3rd reading will still oppose C-10."

Opposition MPs were quick to pounce on the Liberals' close call.

Conservative MP Andrew Scheer, who served as speaker in the last Parliament, questioned whether the Liberals were paying attention to what happens in the House.

"It's unprecedented," he told reporters. "If it weren't for the fact that the Speaker is obliged to vote, to continue the debate, they would have lost a piece of government legislation at a time when they have a pretty substantial majority."

"It's Monday at 1 p.m. Do you know why your Liberal MP isn't at work today?" tweeted Conservative Leader Rona Ambrose after the vote.

Monday's incident is in keeping with a deterioration of relations between the government and the opposition. While Trudeau's government started out with "sunny ways" to set a more collegial tone in the House of Commons, the government's decision to force time allocation on legislation like the Air Canada bill and its physician assisted dying bill have triggered a growing number of procedural skirmishes with the opposition.