

Business of the House

tunity of examining the Minister of Labour on the estimates of Information Canada. The only opportunity that we will have to examine the estimates of this particular agency will be at eight o'clock this evening. This will be our first and our only opportunity, because by midnight tonight, under the Standing Orders of this House, all estimates will be deemed to have passed.

● (1610)

I appeal to Your Honour, as custodian of the rights and privileges of the members of this House, to take this matter under advisement so as to ensure in future that when the government manages the business of the House, especially supply and reference of estimates to standing committees, it takes into account the very specific provisions of Standing Order 58(14) and sees to it that all hon. members are given ample time to examine all of the estimates which are placed before the standing committees.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council on the same point of order.

Mr. Reid: Mr. Speaker, on February 27 last the estimates of Information Canada, along with all the other estimates, were referred to the various standing committees. For three years now, the estimates of Information Canada have been referred to the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts. This was certainly the case while I was chairman of that committee over the last four years.

Second, the government does not control those committees. It does not have a majority on those committees. It is the combined opposition that controls those committees by virtue of its controlling vote. The committees make their own decisions as to what departments they call. Each committee has a certain number of hours allocated to it, the total time available divided evenly among them, and it is possible for the committee to use this time as it sees fit. I do not think that the charge that the government has deliberately attempted to hide the estimates of Information Canada is valid, because it is, as I say, the committee that controls its own time and sets its own schedule and agenda.

The last point I want to make is that it was at the behest of the government, and at my insistence as the parliamentary secretary having some responsibility for committees, that the committee decided to hold hearings tonight on Information Canada. According to the chairman of that committee, no indication had been given by members of the opposition that they wished to consider those estimates. They had among themselves made their own decision as to which departments and agencies they wanted to examine. I think if anyone is to be found at fault, it is not the government but the members of the committee, members of all parties in the House. The members of that committee have had no direction from the government in terms of what the committee shall call or what it shall do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The member for Regina-Lake Centre on the same point of order.

[Mr. McGrath.]

Mr. Benjamin: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that some efforts have been made to schedule committee meetings in such a manner that the situation we have had in the past where a number of committees are sitting at the same time will not occur, and I must say I appreciate those efforts. But what has been happening over the past two weeks in two committees of which I have personal knowledge is that there has been a strange inability on the part of both the government party and the official opposition to assemble a quorum. This occurred just 30 minutes ago when a meeting of the transport and communications committee was cancelled. Only two members were present, the hon. member for Skeena and myself; no one was there from the government and there was no one from the official opposition. Some 30 officials of the Department of Transport were sitting waiting. The same thing happened in the privileges and elections committee. On two occasions, it was unable to meet because of a lack of a quorum. I find it passing strange for a member of this House to complain that we cannot deal with estimates when the fact is that committees cannot get quorums.

I urge the government and the House leaders of all parties to revert to a practice we tried two or three years ago, which was for the House not to sit for a full week while committees met two or three times a day for the entire five day period. A great deal of work was accomplished. I suggest a modification of that practice might be to have the orders of the day question period, and then have House recess until the next day. This procedure could be followed for an entire week. Perhaps a week out of each month over a period of three months should be devoted to committee meetings, and most of the work of hon. members during that week would be on committees. I hope that the committee on privileges and elections will be able to get a quorum tonight.

Mr. Horner (Crowfoot): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege and also on the point of order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Cochrane is rising on the point of order.

Mr. Horner (Crowfoot): I have a question of privilege, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Crowfoot is rising on a question of privilege.

Mr. Horner (Crowfoot): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege because the committee that I have the honour to Chair has been referred to by the hon. member for Regina-Lake Centre. I think I should point out that it has been standard practice for committees to schedule meetings at 3.30, on the understanding that the committee may meet later than 3.30 if the question period in the House of Commons continues past that point. Today has been a rather unusual day to begin with, and even now the question period is not over, or least we have not reached orders of the day.

I could see trouble arising today at 3.30, since a lengthy question period in the House is still in progress. This is why today, after consultation with the vice-chairman of the committee, the minister and others concerned, we decided that the best thing to do would be to cancel the