

Attendance of Ministers in House

which would warrant them taking appropriate action by way of a want of confidence motion at the appropriate time. This is the system of government we have. Whether the non-attendance of certain ministers on certain days is desirable is for the members of parliament, and ultimately for the electorate to decide. It is not right to argue that it is a question of privilege affecting hon. members. It is a matter of the government using the time of its ministers in the most efficient way in the interests of the government and the country.

It is not so many years ago that we had a government, which members of the official opposition should remember or at least read about, which appointed ministers from the other place. Those ministers not only were not in this chamber to answer questions, but were not able to come into this chamber at all.

Hon. members opposite are arguing that the rules should provide what the internal distribution of ministers should be in relation to their duties. With great deference I say that is not our parliamentary system. The Prime Minister may well wish to have certain of his ministers in another part of the country today at some very important national function. If the argument of hon. members prevailed, that would be a breach of the privileges of the house; they could not go. They would have to be here to answer questions. Surely the Prime Minister and the government must have control of the attendance of ministers, and if those ministers do not appear in the chamber of the house when it is thought proper they should, that is a matter for the commons to indicate by way of a lack of confidence motion. It is something which, if it were pursued, would be a matter concerning lack of confidence, and the way to indicate this disapproval would be by a want of confidence motion.

• (3:10 p.m.)

I also want to address myself for a moment, Mr. Speaker, to the argument about rule 39. Rule 39 has no bearing on the question one way or the other. Rule 39 (5) which was quoted by the hon. gentleman was put in at his instigation in order to provide the point of time during our daily proceedings for the asking of oral questions. The rule goes on to provide that if in certain circumstances the answers received are not satisfactory, an hon. member may take action by way of what we now call in the vernacular the late show, the proceedings on the motion for adjournment.

[Mr. McIlraith.]

That is the effect of rule 39. The significance of the words "at this stage" to be found throughout rule 39 is that it is the point in time at which oral questions may be asked. The rule does not deal with or attempt to designate the individual ministers who will be available in the house to answer questions. Hon. members are still free to put such questions as they wish at any time they wish provided it is at this period in the day.

There is one other question, Mr. Speaker. Surely the efficiency of parliament, its reputation and its acceptance in the country, are not to be improved by the commons seeking to turn itself into an administrative body to manage the internal affairs of the government. Surely the efficiency of parliament is something for which the government must answer. The requirements of our time demand that the government seek to use the time of its ministers to the best advantage of the country and of parliament itself. Using its time to the best advantage of parliament is not, I submit, to demand that the 29 ministers be here during the question hour each day of each week. At a rate of questioning of two questions per month it is neither necessary nor desirable in the interests of the country or in the interests of the government of the country to keep a minister in this chamber during every one of the 23 sitting days we have had so far.

The proposition, Mr. Speaker, with deference to the argument of the opposition, is not only ridiculous on its merits but clearly illustrates that the matter is not one of privilege but one of the internal administration of government, for which of course the government is always answerable to the house and ultimately to the voters.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilbert Rondeau (Shefford): Mr. Speaker, in my opinion, the government could have avoided all our criticisms today and last week, and those in the newspapers, about the new proposal of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) dealing with the schedule of attendance of ministers in the house. Since that procedure was imposed on us, it has been obvious that the house, except for some government members, is not happy.

In the past, the poor attendance of hon. members in the opposition as well as on the side of the government in office was criticized on various occasions, and today the adoption of a schedule according to which ministers will automatically be absent from the house is deplored. Looking at the revised list given us