

Supply

for him to say a few words providing he answers a few questions at the same time.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): I see no point of order. I recognize the member for Calgary Centre, and the floor is therefore open to him.

Mr. Harvie Andre (Calgary Centre): Mr. Speaker, we are debating today at second reading Bill C-31, which could go into committee of the whole if the government is willing to answer some questions in regard to spending, the economy and other related matters. But it is not. Therefore, we will have only this opportunity tonight at second reading to debate this bill, which is part of a process that is one of the most meaningless and embarrassing things that we in parliament are called upon to do. The whole process of estimates, spending allocation and supply appropriation is a giant sham, a charade that we perpetrate on the people of Canada every year.

In the third week of February the government presents its main estimates on spending. We know from experience those are not, in fact, their intended expenditures for the rest of the year but only part of them. They are going to present more later on. Committees are given references to look at government spending, but as we all know, that does not happen. There is no opportunity for members of parliament to get to the root of the activities of government departments to determine how they are spending their money.

Each year at this time we end up with an interim supply bill, and in June the final appropriation bill is presented to the House. This is the first time we have had a second reading debate on the bill. Unfortunately, members of parliament have no real opportunity to influence the contents of this bill in any real way. There is no parliamentary control over government spending, none whatsoever. Any attempt to claim otherwise is perpetrating a sham and a charade on the people of Canada. There is no chance for democratic input into government spending planning. There is no way for the people's representatives to exercise any authority over spending. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we would be more honest with the people of Canada if we passed a one-clause bill saying the government could spend whatever they wanted to spend, because this, in fact, is what happens. The government do whatever they want to do. We in parliament have no control whatsoever. To go through this annual charade of pretending there is parliamentary examination of estimates, of spending plans, parliamentary approval of spending plans, parliamentary approval of appropriations, is a charade that we are perpetrating on the people of Canada.

My constituents—and I think the constituents of every other riding in the country—believe in our democratic system. They believe that their members of parliament authorize the taxes, spending, and so on; and they further believe that their representatives monitor or audit the day to day operations of the government. That is what the people of Canada believe. That is what we are taught in school about our parliamentary system. That, in fact, has nothing to do with reality, because in

reality taxes become law when the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chrétien) says they become law. There is no opportunity for parliament to exercise any influence by virtue of standing orders. Spending is exactly what the blue book says it will be. There is no contradictory control or parliamentary input.

The people's representatives have no input whatsoever in terms of determining spending. The day to day monitoring of government activities is impossible due to our inability under the current system to obtain information or find out what is going on. When we have a situation, as we have here today, where we are offering to the Minister of Finance an opportunity to make a statement so that we can question him afterwards to find out what is going on, the minister's parliamentary secretary says no. He does not want that. He does not want parliament to find out.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): Order, please. Perhaps the Chair should clarify one point at this time. It is not that anyone said no. I just said we could not permit members questioning the minister unless we passed second reading and went into committee of the whole. We cannot permit questions being asked at this stage. That was not sought. The ruling that I made earlier was that we could not go into committee at this time. We are still on second reading. We cannot go into committee until we have passed second reading. Therefore, the remarks being made at the present time are not justified.

Mr. Andre: Mr. Speaker, I will not endeavour to argue with the Chair. I have always believed that the House is the master of its own rules and by unanimous consent we can do whatever we want. I was merely seeking unanimous consent to offer that opportunity, which was not granted.

Nevertheless, in terms of this whole spending process which Bill C-31 is a part of, what actually happens here and what people believe happens here are two totally different things. The reality is not democracy, but something else—I do not know what it is. It sure is not parliamentary democracy, and the sooner the people of Canada recognize that fact the sooner we can get back to a democratic system.

Compare our situation with the situation in the United States, Mr. Speaker. A budget is presented by the executive to congress in January, and it contains both taxation and spending plans of the government for the fiscal year starting on October 1. In other words, the legislature in the United States gets nine months to consider the taxing and spending plans of the U.S. government. We get, at most, five weeks. In the United States, congress demands and gets full information and they get changes. We demand information and get nothing and have no recourse. There is never any change. Even in the minority parliament, when the majority of members wanted changes we were precluded from obtaining them under the rules.

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In the United States, congress was what the people believe it to be—a legislative assembly. Parliament in Canada, in terms of spending, is nothing like that whatsoever. We have no