

On the larger point raised by the hon. member with regard to the use of questions on the order paper, it is quite correct that I have been quoted publicly on this subject in recent weeks. My public comments have emanated from the fact that the hon. member himself on numerous occasions has questioned me before this House after I have given a list of questions and, in my view, has tried to embarrass the government or score political points over the fact that some of these questions were not answered.

Mr. McDermid: Really?

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): He would never do that!

Mr. Collenette: The hon. member says that his question has been on the order paper for three years and four months. I suggested before that the hon. member's own government could very well have answered that question during its brief tenure in office.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): You didn't give us time.

Mr. Collenette: So, I do not think that is an accurate point to make. Since taking on this job I have tried very hard to come to grips with the number of questions on the order paper and to ensure that we give an adequate reply to all members. The tabling of answers last Monday to 446 questions means that we have now answered 65 per cent of the questions presently on the order paper.

I should state that the hon. member for Leeds-Grenville is, to my knowledge, the most frequent user of the order paper.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Good for him; that's his job.

Mr. Collenette: Perhaps that is his job, and I can say that the government has answered half of his questions. I would hope he would be at least satisfied with that performance as of today, but I want to get it up to 100 per cent, and I am trying. I spent some time over the summer chasing some of these answers down. The result was the tabling of 446 answers last week.

I would draw your attention, Madam Speaker, to Beauchesne's fifth edition, chapter 9, at page 129, on the definition of oral and written questions. It appears to me—and this is a personal observation although I deal with these questions every day as part of my duties as parliamentary secretary—that some of the questions which I answer in the House—and I read every answer tabled in this House—really go beyond the bounds of the propriety of written questions as outlined in Beauchesne's at page 129, citation 357.

It is my belief, and I have mentioned it to the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard), who, as hon. members know, is an ardent proponent of parliamentary reform, that when we get agreement among all parties to proceed with reform, we should not only look at sitting hours and length of speeches, but also at the propriety of questions on the order paper as to whether or not members are really going beyond the original intent of our parliamentary practice in posing such questions.

Point of Order—Mr. Cossitt

I hope that there will be general agreement among all sides of the House that we look at this matter on an ongoing basis. It worries me, as a member of Parliament who is charged, as are all members, with making sure that the public's money is spent wisely, to see an inordinate number of questions, many of which are merely a series of variations on one major theme and the answers to which could be easily obtained if the member's secretary were to call the minister's office. That way the question would not have to go on the order paper and be translated into both official languages, or go through the departmental procedures which we have established.

I was quoted in the press a while ago as saying that just to table a yes or no answer to any one question costs approximately \$75 of the taxpayer's money. Most of the answers which are tabled in the House are of much longer variety and some of them run into pages. The process costs quite a lot of money and it is my personal belief that members of the House, perhaps through the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, should be looking into the matter. Members of the House should be concerned as to whether or not this particular part of our parliamentary procedure is being followed in the appropriate manner.

There are limits in question period as to the number and types of questions a member can ask. You, Madam Speaker, have laid down a number of rules, or reiterated the proper form for questions in the question period. We have certain procedures for private members' hour. Not all private members' bills come up for debate, yet the one area of our procedures where I think we have an open-ended situation is that of questions on the order paper. In the interest of efficiency and in the interest of fairness to all members who want to ask questions, perhaps we should consider placing a limit on the number of questions that can be asked on the order paper.

● (1520)

I should say in conclusion, Madam Speaker, that if all members of the House of Commons put as many questions on the order paper as does the hon. member for Leeds-Grenville, and they could very well do that—

An hon. Member: Like the hon. member for Vaudreuil (Mr. Herbert).

Mr. Collenette:—then very few members would be totally satisfied with the answers, because the resulting paperwork and cost to the public treasury would virtually impede a useful flow of answers to such questions.

Hon. Walter Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Madam Speaker, I know it was a parliamentary secretary speaking and not a minister, but I want the record to be absolutely clear that if there is any movement by the government to limit the right of members to put questions on the order paper, it will be opposed as vigorously as any thing the hon. parliamentary secretary has ever seen in this House. That is the first thing, Madam Speaker.