

The Budget—Mr. Watson

ly expect their representatives, either individually or as a body, to exercise effective scrutiny over the initiatives and spending of government departments and crown agencies. More succinctly, they expect us to be able to do something about controlling government bureaucracy.

They believe that by constructive criticism we can influence the direction of government policies and government initiatives, and that we can do all this right here in the House of Commons. This public belief is continually being reinforced by the traditionalists in this chamber, most of whom seem to be the really vocal members of the House, who keep insisting and pretending that the action on the floor of the House of Commons is all-important and that if you upgrade any other aspects of this institution, in particular the House of Commons committee system, you are somehow tampering with parliamentary democracy itself. Attach too much attention to committees, and the traditionalists hint darkly that we are moving toward congressionalism.

• (1620)

What are the facts, Mr. Speaker? I do not have to tell you that most of what goes on in this chamber is show business pure and simple. Most questions are not asked to obtain information. Nine times out of ten, questions are either asked to embarrass or the answer is already known. Few of the millions of words of speeches that flow across the pages of *Hansard* ever affect government bills or government policies. By the time these items reach the floor of the House of Commons the die has been cast and policy directions have already been decided upon. The sheer modern-day volume of legislation and programs makes it impossible to give any in-depth treatment to legislation or programs on the floor of the House of Commons. The traditionalists, by continuing to pretend, in the face of reality, that it is on the House of Commons floor that all the important action occurs, are minimizing the role of Members of Parliament as representatives of the people, and in the context of 1973 Canadian society they are doing a disservice both to parliament and to the Canadian people.

Mr. Speaker, if this place is ever to become as effective as the Canadian people expect it to be and want it to be, then that increased effectiveness will have to come about through better use of the House of Commons committee system.

[Translation]

What is the immediate future of the committee system in our parliament? In the present context, Mr. Speaker, the government does not control the committees and because the official opposition does not seem to believe in the usefulness of enhancing the role of the committees, there could well result a tendency to minimize the function of committees in the parliamentary process. This would be a grave error.

[English]

I say this advisedly, Mr. Speaker! There is a tendency throughout this House right now to downplay committees. What better evidence is there than the present situation when, for the first time, the government has indicated that it is willing to have members of the opposition as chairmen of committees? What is the reaction? None of the

[Mr. Watson.]

opposition parties wants to name its members as chairmen. I think they are making a serious mistake. This is a golden opportunity for certain of their members to shine as committee chairmen. But the attitude toward the importance of committee chairmanships which has been demonstrated on all sides of the House downgrades the committee system.

Mr. Alexander: Not in the area of chairmanship.

Mr. Watson: I feel that if we had the right kind of attitude on all sides of the House, we would have a rush for the job of chairman of committees. If the opposition were serious, they would be taking the government up on its offer to have a percentage of committee chairmanships based on representation in this House.

[Translation]

It would be a serious mistake to minimize the role of the committees of parliament. Enhancing it, more than any other action will give hon. members the opportunity to contribute to improvement of legislation, to reveal unnecessary expenses and to suggest to the government new projects and new goals for its policies.

If, as some seem to believe, we are entering a long minority-government period in Canada, I believe this makes it all the more important to strengthen our committee system. What should be done now? The great major improvements brought about over the past years have vested in House of Commons committees, three main responsibilities: the review of the budget of government expenses, the study of bills at the very important stage of second reading, and also essential task of conducting an inquiry when a committee, under a constitutional order, is dealing with a specific subject. All this shows that actually committees play a much more significant role within the parliamentary organization. But the changes should not stop there.

[English]

I urge the government to further expand the inquiry role of our House of Commons committees. As members are aware, any inquiry role of a committee is really in the hands of the government since it, in the final analysis, has absolute control over the terms of reference given to a committee or whether they are given at all.

This government could take a giant step forward in increasing the power of House of Commons committees by establishing as an automatic practice of this House referral of annual reports of all departments to the respective standing committees. Such a practice would give committees freedom to investigate any matter mentioned in an annual report and to report to the House without control by the government. I would go even further and suggest that not only the annual reports of departments but the annual reports of every Crown corporation be automatically referred each year to the respective standing committees of the House of Commons. This, of course, would be a nightmare for civil servants and for ministers of the Crown but, Mr. Speaker, I am convinced that such a change is essential if we are to give Members of Parliament control over civil servants, government bureaucracy and red tape which the Canadian public clearly wants them to have.