

Public Accounts

legislation, in fact about twice as much time as was spent by this chamber.

• (2:50 p.m.)

So, there is certainly a very clear case for the work that is being done in the standing committees and for the entire committee system. When hon. members opposite question the cost, I think it is fair to examine these things because it is not just the cost but the value received that has to be considered. When one sees the number of hours spent in detailed clause by clause examination of legislation and of departmental estimates, in the sort of detail that is possible in the committees but not possible here, one realizes the importance of the committee system. We are in conflict at all times on at least two counts: first, this House is a debating society in the true sense of the word and second, it is important that everyone has time to speak in this chamber on subjects of their choice.

At the same time, we already sit in this chamber as many hours in the day and days in the year as it is possible. The schedule to which we adhere at present cannot be stretched much more. This means that we are in conflict in so far as efficiency is concerned. This place cannot go on maintaining the respect of the citizenry if it does not do its business efficiently. We are using all the available time and we must keep up with the business. The result is that the committee system presents a golden opportunity to make the procedures of the House more efficient, because the matters that have to be discussed can be discussed in the House as well as in several standing committees at the same time. The item of the most fundamental importance is to ensure that through participation in the affairs of the standing committees the whole system is made to contribute and to complement the function of the House, not to compete with it. That, I think, is the problem.

In addition, we are in another conflict which I think is very important because we, who are directly involved in the affairs of this chamber, become knowledgeable about what happens here. We are all elected representatives; we are very much involved in politics and in government, and consequently we tend to think that everyone in the country knows and cares about these matters as much as we do. In fact, they do not. In fact, the great majority of our citizens not only do not know a great deal about the political life of the country or the function of their government, but they do not care.

It is an important function of Parliament as a whole to fulfil an educative role, to take the government, at least to some extent, to the people; to get out to the country and function in other centres than the very much confined space of these buildings. The committee system can do this. When a committee travels to Vancouver or to Halifax or to any of the smaller or more remote centres—and here I am addressing myself to hon. members from the areas outside the major metropolitan centres—the government is brought closer to the people. Hon. members know that they represent people who feel they are very much out of the main stream of events; they are

[Mr. Jerome.]

away from provincial capitals and from the national capital.

I think it is a very important duty and function of Parliament to attempt to bring the government to those people and, so far as possible, to let those people participate in and see government functioning in their own centres. The committees that travel about the country, as well as working at the time that they are there, fulfil that very important function. So, we have the conflict of efficiency as opposed to the debating society approach which enables everybody to hold up the work of this House and carry on until everyone has had a chance to speak. We also have the conflict of centralizing the government in Ottawa as opposed to bringing it to the people.

These are the conflicts that have to be borne in mind when hon. members say that the committee system is detracting from the business of the House and from the importance of this chamber. I will go along with the hon. member in attempting, as he was, to be non-partisan because I do not suggest for one minute that what I am about to say here does not tar us and hon. members opposite with the same brush. The plain truth is that in theory the committee system at present is not bad.

Mr. McGrath: Nonsense.

Mr. Jerome: What can make it bad is the failure of members of this House to participate in it and make it function. That is where the indictment should lie, not on the system itself but the manner and the extent in which hon. members participate in it and make it function. Again I say I am not attempting to lay criticism at the feet of hon. members opposite that does not tar us with the same brush, because the performance of some of the hon. members on our side is no better.

Mr. Woolliams: Do not become a statesman because of your recent appointment; just carry on as you did before.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. The Parliamentary Secretary has the floor.

Mr. Jerome: Of course the hon. member for Calgary North (Mr. Woolliams) holds himself out as a paragon of virtue so far as his participation in the committee system is concerned. I am sure that if we examined the record we would find that his attendance at committee meetings is such as to be exemplary to other hon. members. However, I wish he would concentrate on other members to make sure they do as much as he does, because at present that is not the case. I am not speaking as a statesman, I am stating a fact.

The fact is that members of this House do not show up at committee meetings and do not participate in the way they should. If the hon. member for Calgary North thinks it is funny that I am talking as a statesman, that is too bad.

Mr. Baldwin: Would the Parliamentary Secretary answer a question?