

Interim Supply

good faith with the Government of Canada. There are six supply motions in the house—

An hon. Member: There are four this year.

Mr. Benson: I beg your pardon; by agreement it has been reduced to four. After the supply motions, hon. members opposite may stand up and vote lack of confidence in the government and defeat the government. Instead of doing that, they are using interim supply to try to starve out the government; and in starving the government, they are starving the people with whom the government must deal.

A few weeks ago I can remember hon. members opposite saying that we had a relatively limited amount of time left to deal with supply; let all the parties get together and decide how much time ought to be spent on each department. The government thought this was a very good idea. But what do we find a few weeks later? The official opposition is using ten days—this is the tenth day—to debate something that is not really a supply item at all but a piece of business already on the order paper. That piece of business can be discussed fully by the opposition when it is brought forward by the government.

Mr. Churchill: When was it put on the order paper?

Mr. Benson: I should like to indicate what happened with respect to interim supply, and the availability of government funds which would enable the government to determine whether the midmonth payrolls could be met, and whether suppliers' invoices could be met.

I wish to assure the hon. gentleman for Winnipeg South Centre that there was no juggling of accounts, and that no money was used out of any vote for any purpose other than as indicated in that particular vote.

Mr. Churchill: How can you say that? You are asking us to accept your word. How will the minister produce the evidence with respect to this?

Mr. Benson: In a few minutes I shall table Treasury Board minutes indicating the proceedings taken, proceedings taken through contingency vote 15, which is the vote providing for special circumstances such as these.

Mr. Woolliams: Would the minister allow a question?

Mr. Benson: I should like to finish this statement, then I shall be pleased to answer any question.

[Mr. Benson.]

For the first week in October no special action was taken on this particular situation, as it related to interim supply and the mid-November payroll. No action was considered necessary, because on many occasions in the past two years interim supply has not been granted until the eighth, the ninth, or even the tenth day of the month. I do not mean after ten days of debate, but on the eighth, ninth or tenth day of the month. This has not created any particular difficulty.

On Tuesday, November 8, it was brought to my attention that the fact of November 11 being a holiday meant that the first midmonth payroll would fall on November 10. I still, at that point, hoped the opposition would act responsibly and pass one miserable month's interim supply, which is what the government was asking. I then realized that early action would be necessary if we were to avoid difficulties in meeting our mid-November payrolls on schedule.

Accordingly, I reviewed the situation on Tuesday evening, November 8, with the staff of the Treasury Board. The first fact that became apparent related to the ten departments for which full supply had already been granted by parliament. It seemed clear that no obstacle presented itself to the payment of civil servants of those departments, and, accordingly, on November 8 I gave instructions that for these ten departments mid-November payrolls should be met in the normal way.

I also gave instructions that a detailed examination should be made of the position of each vote in the remaining departments which were operating on the basis of interim supply. These are the departments for which full supply had not been granted by parliament.

The following day, November 9, it was related to me that in a substantial number of cases votes of these departments had sufficient funds left over from earlier grants of interim supply to meet their mid-November payrolls, but that in a number of other cases, the votes had balances remaining that were insufficient for this purpose. At this point the question arose as to whether authority should be given to pay mid-November payrolls in the case of those votes which had sufficient balances remaining.

I was concerned about the inequities which would arise if some of the civil servants in these departments were to be paid for mid-November and others were not to be paid, merely because of the circumstance that some votes retained sufficient balance to make this possible and others did not.