

Constitution of Canada

[English]

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, my remarks on this motion will be very brief indeed. I want to thank hon. members for their participation in this short debate and for raising quite a number of important questions in connection with the operation of the standing and special committees. It is true that in the general opinion of members of the House the changes that have taken place in the rules have meant that the operation of standing committees has become more extensive, both legislatively and in examination of the estimates. It is also obvious that the new role of the standing and special committees has to some extent altered the atmosphere in the House of Commons itself. The general wish, of course, was to give this additional responsibility to standing committees; but it is now clear to all of us who are observing the House of Commons itself that the additional responsibility that has been given to the standing committees and to special committees has had an effect on the House itself.

Whether that effect has on the whole been totally beneficial is certainly something on which opinions will develop as time goes on. It is obvious that as standing committees multiply in importance and in the burdens they carry, the prospects for members attending debates in the House will decrease. It is a matter of regret to me that many important speeches are made in the Commons to a very small attendance.

Mr. Dinsdale: We are all at committees.

Mr. MacEachen: Members are elsewhere, hopefully doing their jobs in the committees. I for one, speaking personally, attach the highest importance to maintaining the House of Commons as the central forum in this country and as the central forum in our parliamentary system.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. McGrath: It is about time somebody said that.

Mr. MacEachen: When we enthusiastically gave this new and important role to the standing and special committees, it was with the clear expectation that the role would be developed within the context of our parliamentary system. Certainly, no decision has been taken by this House or by any other authority of which I am aware that would lead to the conclusion that, because of the added importance of standing committees, we have adopted a congressional form of committee system.

It may be—indeed, I am sure this is the case—that the committee system is evolving, that things are happening within the committee system which affect the House and which have not been clearly foreseen or clearly intended, or indeed, may not have been fully thought out at the beginning. There is nothing wrong at all with that. We do want to maintain the importance of the committee system. But at the same time we want to know where we are going, just where this new system will lead us and what effect it is going to have on the House.

[Mr. Speaker.]

A lot of practical questions have been raised about the operation of the committee system, the cost, the logistics, about sub-committees, staffing, sittings of committees while the House is sitting and travel—new questions that have not been fully dealt with. Having myself expressed the opinion that the committee system is expected to operate within the parliamentary system, all I can say is that the House of Commons must maintain its mastery over the committees.

Having said that, I do not for a moment suggest that we turn the clock back. But I do suggest that we move forward in the direction of giving new importance to the committees. We must look at their role in the total context of the parliamentary system. Looking at it in that way, if changes ought to be made in our present system, then they ought to be made clearly and with full insight as to their effect.

I listened with great interest to the speech of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) and to all other hon. members who have spoken in the debate, and I will certainly undertake to consider with my colleagues the question whether further study should be given by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization to the operation of the committee system and where it is going. I want to say, speaking personally as government House Leader, that I intend to attempt to conduct my own examination of the effects of the committee system on our total operations and on the role of the member of parliament in order to obtain some clear idea, at least for my own guidance, as to the direction we should take in the future.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I recommend that this resolution be adopted, with the assurance that the suggestions that have been made will be carefully considered.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members have heard the motion proposed by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen). Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the said motion?

Some hon. Members: On division.

Motion agreed to.

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● (3:00 p.m.)

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

CONTINUATION OF DEBATE ON ADDRESS IN REPLY

The House resumed, from Wednesday, October 14, consideration of the motion of Mr. Jacques-L. Trudel for an address to His Excellency the Governor General in reply to his speech at the opening of the session, and the amendment thereto of Mr. Stanfield (p. 29), and the amendment to the amendment of Mr. Fortin (p. 136).

Hon. Jack Davis (Minister of Fisheries): Mr. Speaker, I want to say a few words this afternoon about the establishment of a new department of environmental affairs, and I should like to say at the outset that shaping our