

Suggested Improvements to Committee System

range of agencies of the House of Commons. Personally, I would be unhappy if such a system were introduced. It is bad enough now. We are proliferating independent, quasi-judicial agencies more quickly than our ability to keep track of them. Indeed, the responsibility of government is diffused, and responsibilities under the political part of our system are being diffused through this delegation of responsibility.

In considering any reform of the House of Commons I would be inclined to stick strictly to a system involving the government's being accountable and responsible for its activities. Here we come to the question of allocation of time in debates of the House of Commons. Speaking as a backbencher, I have been extremely frustrated in that I have not had the opportunity to speak in debates in the House, largely because the House has not been subject to an allocation of time rule. This applies to committee proceedings as well. Backbenchers, who are part of our responsible system of government, are always under pressure by government to co-operate and to ensure that legislation is passed. We are only given opportunities to speak when there is an allocation of time agreed to formally or informally.

If hon. members want proof of this they should look at the debate that has been going on today on the subject of co-operatives and credit unions. In this debate an allocation of time was agreed on. They should also look at budget debates, at the Throne Speech debate and at debates on opposition days. On those occasions the whip on the government side has to fight off members who want to speak, because they so seldom have an opportunity in the ordinary course of House business. This factor must be taken into consideration. We cannot consider the committee system and its reform without considering the entire operations of the House of Commons and the way in which the House operates.

May I now turn to the facilities which are made available to committees. I agree with the hon. member for Selkirk. A great deal more could be done to facilitate committee work if the facilities were available. One of our problems in the House of Commons is that we have run out of space. With the fantastic growth of the administration, with the increased number of cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries, the result has been that almost no space is available for backbenchers on all sides of the House. We require a substantial increase of space to bring us back to the position we occupied in 1963. This means that there soon must be initiatives taken by the government. Members cannot be effective in the House or in committee if they do not have adequate facilities, adequate space and adequate staff.

• (4:50 p.m.)

One of the duties I perform for caucus is as co-ordinator of the parliamentary intern program. Members have turned down the opportunity to take interns because of a lack of space in their offices. As the hon. member for Saint John-Lancaster (Mr. Bell) pointed out, we are now taking on a second secretary. Many members do not even have enough room in their offices, according to federal civil service regulations, for one secretary and themselves.

This is an indication of how badly the government has bungled its responsibility of providing space on Parlia-

[Mr. Reid.]

ment Hill for Members of Parliament. We attempted to get the government to move on this. They have so far been unwilling to do so. The only suggestion they made results in shoving backbenchers off to the Confederation Building and turning the centre block and the west block into a haven for ministers and their flunkies. This solution is entirely unsatisfactory and would only go further to widen the gap between the government and the backbenchers of all parties. It seems to me that one of the things opposition members could do with their control over opposition days is to bring this very important matter up as a full two-day vote of confidence. If they did that, I can assure hon. members opposite there would be a large number of government members on this side who would be prepared to vote against the government on that subject.

Mr. Walker: Would the hon. member permit a question? Can he say whether he felt this way when he was the executive assistant to a minister?

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Reid: In those days, Mr. Speaker, we only had two offices, one for the minister and one for the secretary. The executive assistant in those days was lodged somewhere in the departmental offices. But I must say that as a backbencher I have far less space available than I ever did as an executive assistant. If Members of Parliament were treated as well as executive assistants, there would be no criticisms and no difficulties from any backbenchers in this House.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Reid: The last point I want to make, Mr. Speaker, concerns the proposal made to bring committee reports to the floor of the House of Commons. I think, in general, this is a good idea. Committee reports do not yet get the attention they deserve in the House of Commons. However, to make time for this the opposition will have to give up something. This brings me again to questions of allocation of time. In a responsible system of government, it seems to me the government should have reasonable assurances from the opposition that a program laid out at the beginning of a session should have a reasonable chance of being implemented. At the present time, the government does not have that assurance and is faced with the problem of providing extra time for almost any motion. This is extremely difficult to find simply because there is no guarantee that its legislation will get through, and if there are allocation of time agreements they are always made after the end of a fairly substantial debate.

There are other alternatives available to opposition members—not, unfortunately, to government backbenchers. Opposition members have opposition days available to them. Such opportunities allow them, in a variety of motions, to pinpoint areas of public concern. Why not use these days for the discussion of committee reports? The opportunity is there. Why not use it? Surely the government could have no objection if an opposition member rose in his place and moved that, say, the report of the broadcasting committee of such and such a day be accepted. This would at least force a vote. If the government did not want to do this, and since those reports are generally a