

Committee on Estimates

We had considered what estimates we might refer to the committee this year. We did that some two months ago and decided to refer to the committee the estimates of the Department of Labour, the Department of National Health and Welfare, the Department of National Revenue and the Post Office Department.

Requests have been made by opposition groups with respect to other departments. I should like to say, sir, that we shall do our best to fit into the program those departments that are now ready to appear before the committee, but if there is time we shall do our best to accommodate the opposition groups, not in full because I know that will not be possible, but in part at least.

On that basis, I hope, sir, that the motion will carry and that the committee may be able to get to work at an early date.

Mr. E. D. Fulton (Kamloops): Mr. Speaker, I have no doubt that the motion will carry, although there are some changes we should like to see in it before it does carry.

The minister has said that this committee was set up last year on an experimental basis. I took from what he said it was felt by himself and his colleagues that it performed a useful function last year.

With that statement I would agree. We in the official opposition felt that it was a useful step in enabling this house to deal more effectively and efficiently with one of its major tasks, perhaps its major task, namely, the scrutinizing and the control of the spending of public money, but we felt—and on reflection we have no reason to change our opinion—that its usefulness was largely circumscribed by the restrictions on its power.

It is our view that this committee can perform a useful function, and it should be continued on a basis that will enable it better to perform that function. Perhaps so that we can be quite clear as to the basis of discussion here, I should say we feel that there are two main functions that this committee on estimates could and should perform. One of them is a considerably minor function. I will mention it first. It is a possible method of saving the time of the whole house. There were, as I recall it, in the committee appointed to assist Mr. Speaker in the revision of the rules which sat for several years, a number of discussions as to whether we should have a committee on estimates, and if so, what should be its nature, its composition and its purposes. There were quite a number who suggested that one of its major functions would be to save the time of the house and to shorten the session. Both at the time these discussions were taking place and as a result

[Mr. Harris.]

of the experience we had in the committee, I did not feel and do not feel that was or should be its primary function.

With the growing volume of government business and with the growing volume of expenditure, I think it is inevitable that there will be a tendency for sessions to grow longer. Therefore we should approach that aspect of the situation not so much with a determination to shorten sessions, because if we do we are going to have to cut down on the effectiveness of our work somewhat. We should approach it rather from the point of view of how we can most effectively and efficiently discharge our work so that sessions will not grow unnecessarily and burdensomely longer. It is that function which I think this committee can best discharge, and which should be its main purpose; that is, to enable parliament to perform its function of the control of expenditure most efficiently and effectively. In the light of the growing volume of government work, and the extension of the field into which governments seem to engage unnecessarily—some no doubt will say necessarily—unless there is efficiency in the work of parliament in scrutinizing the expenditure of governments, the whole question of the extent to which the people's money is taken and spent by government may get entirely out of control. I do not like to be extreme in my statements, as the Minister of Finance knows, but there is some ground for feeling that it has already gone too far and the government dips its hand too deep into the national revenue to an extent that has gone beyond the safety point.

In considering this matter, as in so many cases, I think it is useful to look at the experience and history of other countries, and the one which forms the readiest guide for us is the experience of the United Kingdom parliament. In looking at the debate at the time when their estimates committee was first set up I find that this was the basis upon which they decided to set up that committee in the year 1912 when they first had an estimates committee. The statement of the chancellor of the exchequer, Mr. Lloyd George, in which he introduced the motion setting up the committee, made it perfectly clear that the purpose which the government had in mind in setting it up was to enable the house to provide a means by which the House of Commons could more effectively discharge its duties to scrutinize and control expenditure. It was made quite clear in his statement that there was a large body of opinion in the United Kingdom parliament at that time, and I think it would be accurate to say it could be taken from the chancellor's