

*Office of Prime Minister*

number of letters. I cannot recall the exact number, but I remember that one year when I appeared before the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates it turned out that the number one subject about which the Prime Minister had received letters on that particular day was on the question of robins in New Brunswick and the campaign to save them, and the letters numbered some 11,000. All of these letters have to be answered, and so do inquiries; thus, a good 50 per cent of the bodies in the Prime Minister's office are engaged in correspondence.

The Privy Council office is an office of long standing. Even 25 years ago the Privy Council office comprised no more than a handful of officials who acted as a secretariat to the cabinet so as to ensure that decisions taken in cabinet were truly communicated to the departments concerned, and enforced. Under the changes that have taken place in the government, basically those same functions are being carried on. Because the Prime Minister is chairman of the cabinet, it is he who has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the collective decisions taken in cabinet are communicated to the departments and enforced by those departments. You will understand, of course, Mr. Speaker, that many departments put their own interpretation on what should be done, and because many of them have grown in response to the legislative demands we have made upon them, often they are not in harmony with the decisions taken by cabinet and they resist them. Those who are ministers and those who have criticized ministries know this to be the fact.

As for the responsibilities of the Prime Minister, he attends the question period daily. In point of fact, I think that if hon. members will check the record they will find that the present Prime Minister probably has one of the best records over the last 20 years for appearing in the House of Commons to answer the criticisms of his government made by members of the opposition, whose right and duty it is to put these criticisms to him. I think it is quite clear that the Prime Minister is not isolated; he is in the House in the question period and answers questions daily. These questions apply not only to his own operation but to the operations of the government as a whole.

There is no way that the Prime Minister can escape the barrage of questioning that comes from hon. members opposite. He is here in the House, he responds to those questions, and he is accountable on the floor of the House of Commons for any criticisms made by members of the opposition. That, I think, is absolutely clear. In point of fact, if one looks at the volume of questions it would be crystal clear in all our minds that it is the Prime Minister who responds to most of the questions. There is no question that he is the target of the opposition and number one spokesman for his government.

The hon. member for Rocky Mountain raised a very interesting point about the nature of our politics. He complained that this parliament is not necessarily the vehicle for holding the Prime Minister in check or for defeating the Prime Minister. I tend to agree with that interpretation. I myself regret that most of the important politicking in this country is not carried on in this chamber but, instead, takes place outside the chamber. I think there are two reasons for this. First of all, we tend to use this chamber not as a political forum. I think we waste our

time doing too much with other things rather than concentrating on political issues. We also waste our time with antiquated procedures. We do not have the time to debate the issues that the Canadian public wants debated in public. I think that because the House of Commons has not taken action to deal with this reality, it has lost, and is losing, a great deal of respect on the part of Canadians.

About two years ago a Gallup poll that was published showed that the respect the people had for members of parliament and for parliament as an institution was declining. I feel that we are not making it our responsibility to check the government and to forcibly bring it to account. I think parliament can do a great deal more to bring its procedures into tune with the times. It can appropriate powers unto itself and become a much more effective forum.

This would mean that many members of this House would have to give up a lot of things which they regard as important and vital to the way in which they as individuals carry on their business. I submit, Mr. Speaker, that it would be an extraordinarily painful experience for many members of parliament if the House were to change its procedures, but I hope that program of parliamentary reform upon which the House leader has embarked will be the vehicle for making parliament more germane, more important, more the centre of political activity in Canada.

I do not agree with the former leader of the Social Credit party, Bob Thompson, who once complained to the Speaker that a terrible thing was happening in the House of Commons—it was becoming a political body and political debate was being introduced. I think that is the spice of this institution. It is important that we consider the way we behave and do business in this House, with a view to dealing expeditiously with those matters about which there is a great deal of agreement. We must put the important issues before the Canadian people, debate them and then find a mechanism for bringing them to a conclusion after meaningful debate, instead of the one-sided monologues that we have in this House at the present time. Because for debate to be meaningful there must be contributions from both sides. Under our existing rules and practices in the House, this does not take place; consequently, in many respects we are responsible for lulling the Canadian people to sleep instead of taking advantage of their natural instinct for things political in Canada.

I should also like to make the point that when the Prime Minister and ministers of the government find themselves going outside the House, over the head of parliament, as the hon. member for Rocky Mountain expressed it, there are two good reasons. First of all, it is helpful and healthful for both the Prime Minister and his ministers to get out of the House of Commons, out of the stultifying atmosphere that is Ottawa, to where the "real" people are, so they can become continually reinforced in their awareness that Canada is a land of diversity. If the Prime Minister, ministers and backbenchers were to stay in Ottawa all the time, there would be a tendency for them to get sucked into the kind of mentality that pervades this place. This is why members of parliament are able to come back here from their constituencies in all regions of Canada and contribute an input into the civil service