

Health, Welfare and Social Affairs

[English]

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the house to adopt the said motion?

Mr. Arnold Peters (Timiskaming): Mr. Speaker, early in the session the house established its list of committees, and today three committees are reporting to the house asking for leave to sit while the house is sitting. I am sure Your Honour is aware of the difficulty that has arisen as a result of the number of committees that are sitting each day. For example, for today there was a pretty full slate. I suggest that if each of these committees is going to report to the house and ask for leave to sit while the house is sitting, the situation will become impossible.

• (2:50 p.m.)

May I recall the incidents that arose earlier this week, when on two occasions a quorum was called in this chamber. Since on two occasions there has been difficulty in obtaining a quorum in this house, the situation might well become aggravated. I therefore oppose the adoption of this report. I ask Your Honour and the house leaders to reconsider the advisability of allowing a number of committees the indiscriminate right to sit while the house is sitting, since we have already experienced difficulties in having hon. members attend the house.

Committees ought to meet on specific days. Naturally, if delegations are brought to Ottawa from some distance away and are to appear before a committee, I concede there is a legitimate reason for that committee to sit while the house sits, and I might have no objection to allowing such a committee to sit for eight, ten or 12 hours in one day though normally I should be opposed to the idea of committees sitting while the house is sitting. Committee work has become exhausting for hon. members rather than edifying. The time hon. members spend in committee work represents a great part of the time they have available for all work, the result being that the operation of the house is interfered with.

If rules are to be changed in such a way that hon. members have no say in the changes, it seems to me no one will give credence to the proposition that hon. members must, as a primary duty, be in attendance in this house. Changes ought to be brought up in the committee on procedure and should be applicable to all committees; otherwise we might see an abuse of privileges enjoyed by committees.

[Mr. Isabelle.]

For that reason I am opposed to the adoption of this report today.

Hon. Donald S. Macdonald (President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, perhaps I might address a few remarks to the house on this matter. The hon. member may not be aware of this, but there is in operation a consultative system among all parties of the house which is carried on by way of a co-ordinating committee set up for the purpose of co-ordinating the business before the committees. The hon. gentleman's party, in common with all other parties here, is represented on that committee. It is the express purpose of that committee to so regulate the business before the standing committee of the house that the situation he is concerned about will not arise.

I agree that if committees are indiscriminately called to sit at the same time, either before the house sits or while the house is sitting, difficulties may be created. To avoid that risk there is this co-operative arrangement to co-ordinate the work of the committees.

The purpose of the motion moved on behalf of the standing committee on privileges and elections is specifically as a result of that effort to regulate our business generally, so that our committees can sit. In other words the work is to be carried on as suggested by the co-ordinating committee, in which it is decided how our committee work can most effectively be carried out.

I hope the hon. member withdraws his opposition to this matter, since it is a co-operative arrangement that has been worked out among the various groups here.

Mr. Peters: Mr. Speaker, the question before us has nothing to do with the committee on privileges and elections. It seems to me that the health and welfare committee has jumped the gun, and I am suggesting that this matter be held up until it can be decided by the house.

Mr. Speaker: Is the house ready for the question?

Mr. Bell: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: The house must give unanimous consent before a motion can be made for concurrence in the report. Since there is obviously not unanimous agreement I suggest that we do not proceed further.