

Privileges and Elections

followed by this statement which was made by the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River. I quote:

It's a good thing he made that announcement. It's already been decided.

I then said in my letter that if the matter has already been decided, why should we waste the taxpayers' money and the time of committee members in dealing with it. I do not for one moment question the prerogative of the government to make decisions on any matter. Having once made its decision, it seems to me, the proper way for the government to act would be to remove that part already decided upon from the terms of reference of the committee. The committee should not be asked to deal with the matter.

In that context, sir, I agree that the committee was badly treated. The chairman of the committee, the hon. member for Montmorency (Mr. Lafamme), properly brought my letter to the attention of the committee when we were meeting under terms of reference which had been established during the previous session. We were assured that the statement of the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River was not in accordance with the facts, and that the matter had not been decided. Actually, there were assurances that the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River did not know what he was talking about. Then, within a matter of days, we were able to read the Speech from the Throne. Included in it was the subject matter we are now discussing. I submit that fact indicates some members of the committee did not know what they were talking about, either. That is all water under the bridge, now, Mr. Speaker. But it is not too late for us to make sure that this committee functions in the manner our committees ought to function. In reviewing something as vital as electoral reform, it is not too late for this committee to act in a non-partisan fashion.

I note that in the motion moved by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Macdonald) nothing was said about the committee members travelling from place to place. I agree that if the committee's travelling will mean unnecessary expense, then it should not travel. My colleague, the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard), made a good point when referring to a committee's trip to the Maritimes. There was terrible waste and little point in half-filling an expensive aircraft with 24 members and then flying them about the country so that in four days they could meet

three people. Let me not be misunderstood on this point. I agree with the hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis), that the meetings with the chief electoral officers of those three provinces were valuable. I agree that those meetings had to be held in camera. While travelling about the country, I think the committee should also have heard briefs and submissions from members of the public on the subject of electoral reform, because that subject is the business of everyone.

Committee members are as anxious as any to avoid unnecessary jaunts which waste time and money. Nevertheless, there are sometimes good reasons for having the committee move from place to place. For example, there is the whole matter of the proxy voting system about which I know little. It has been said that the committee would be wise to meet with the committee of the Ontario government which has considered this whole matter at great length. It seems to me it would be valuable to obtain the views of that committee; it would save some time, at least. Similarly, I know of at least two organizations which have made surveys and which are now preparing briefs many hundreds of miles from here—one of them is in fact 2,000 miles from here—in the hope that they can appear before the committee and present their views. I suppose they could come to Ottawa, but again I suggest that this is the business of the people of Canada, even before it is the business of this House or of the committee. If arrangements can be made for submissions and presentations to be heard not only from electoral officers but from individuals and public groups, it seems to me the expense would be worth while. If, on the other hand, the only people we are to hear from are electoral officers I do not think it would be necessary for the entire committee to travel. It would be better to bring those persons to Ottawa.

● (5.30 p.m.)

If the leader of the House is not prepared to make changes in the terms of reference I hope the committee itself will request additional room in its terms of reference.

Mr. Francis: May I ask the hon. member a question? He said he did not think a trip to the Atlantic provinces would be making the best use of public funds. Does he feel that interviewing a committee in Ottawa on the results of its trip to Australia might be of help to our committee?