

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, March 25, 1954

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EXPLANATION OF CHANGE IN AMPLIFYING SYSTEM

Mr. Speaker: I think I owe the house an explanation as to why there is on the floor of the house at this moment what is called in technical terms a roving microphone. It is merely a duplication of the microphone which is suspended in front of the minister and through which he would speak if the floor microphone was not placed in front of his desk. This is merely an experiment for today.

Hon. members have complained about the insufficiency of the amplifying system. On March 12 the hon. member for Burnaby-Richmond (Mr. Goode) asked that something be done about it, and I promised him, and the hon. member for Ottawa East (Mr. Richard) and others who privately have made requests that I look into the matter, that I would do so. On Monday last Mr. Guy Fountain, the president of the Tannoy group of companies, was in Canada. I had a conversation with him and he sent me an explanation of what the system means. I think there are some misapprehensions as to what this system really is. Perhaps hon. members think too much of this system as a loudspeaker system; that it amplifies the voice, the moment the speaker utters words, to every part of the house including the territory surrounding him; but that is not so.

Around the speaker there is what is called a muted zone. A few members sitting around the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Pearson), for instance, would hear nothing else but the natural voice of the minister. We had an instance of that the other day when the hon. member for Bellechasse (Mr. Picard) pointed out to me that he could not hear anything while the Prime Minister (Mr. St. Laurent) was speaking. If hon. members will look at the chart—and I have asked the Tannoy company to prepare a printed chart so that we can circulate it among hon. members in order to inform them—they will see exactly what their position is.

When the Prime Minister speaks through the second microphone to my right his words are carried to all hon. members except to

those sitting around him, and the hon. member for Bellechasse, being in that muted zone, would not hear anything through the loudspeaker placed on his desk; whereas the voice of the Prime Minister would be carried through the amplifying system to the distant corners of the house.

With the permission of the house, I should like to read the prepared statement of Mr. Fountain. I quote:

The Tannoy installation provided to improve acoustics and enable free debating to be enjoyed with greater clarity and audibility comprises several important features and performs certain extremely useful, but limited, functions.

Unlike most "microphone systems" where the person using the microphone is on a rostrum, stage, or in a strategic visual position, and where only one microphone point exists with an array of loudspeakers operated from this microphone, the facilities in the House of Commons are designed to enable any member of the house to get up spontaneously and from his own desk address the whole house and be heard by all members in the house, regardless of where he is normally located and whether or not he is addressing his remarks in any particular direction. This versatility is achieved only by permitting certain restrictions, and calls for the constant operation of a control panel by a skilled engineer and his standby.

The devices which hang down on wires from the ceiling are the microphones, and the small cylindrical features on the members' desks and behind the seats in the galleries are the reproducers. They can scarcely be called "loudspeakers", since they are not intended to make a person's voice appear to be louder than it is.

The microphones are devices which, whilst they can discriminate, within a controlled zone, in the amount of sound they pick up from any given direction,—in other words, they can pick up in a forward direction, but not necessarily in a rearward direction—they cannot, at any time and under normal circumstances, discriminate in the type of noise or sound to which they are sensitive. That is to say, if they hear a person speaking, they will also hear the noise of a dropping book or rustling paper, or any other extraneous noise, and these noises will be amplified proportionately with the person's voice. They will also pick up, in addition to the orator's voice and local extraneous noises, reproduction from any loudspeaker sufficiently loud in the vicinity of the microphone. It is for this latter reason that the whole of the system was divided up into zones, which are individually and electronically controlled by the operator in the following manner:

When a member of the house rises to his feet, the suspended microphone nearest to him is made "live" and sensitive, and simultaneously the remaining microphones are reduced in sensitivity. In addition to this, the small speakers on the desks in the immediate vicinity of the orator are muted, and are not permitted to radiate any amplified speech. The reason for this is twofold: Firstly, if they are left switched on, their output could easily be sufficient to operate the microphone as well as the