

House of Commons Procedures

• (9:40 p.m.)

Mr. Pickersgill: Mr. Chairman, I think I ought to make a sort of confession to the House. Perhaps what I did was wrong, but it could be changed. When we formed the Government and I was chosen House Leader, I had been very irritated while I was in the Opposition by the great many questions which were, quite properly according to the rules, made orders for returns because they affected two departments. It was quite clear the Members who put the questions on the Order Paper wanted to have them printed in *Hansard*. I suggested to my colleagues that, by reason of leaving them on the Order Paper longer, we should try to get the information gathered together, so instead of their being made orders for return and the answers never being printed, the answers would be printed in *Hansard*. I am therefore to some degree to blame for the fact that some of these questions have stayed on the Order Paper so long. If it would suit hon. Members better to have them made orders for returns and taken off the order paper, it would cause less criticism for the Government, but I do not really believe it would serve the purposes Members have in putting the questions on the Order Paper.

I do agree with what my colleague says about trying to direct a question to one department, and another one to another Minister, and thus the two questions would get more effective answers. No one likes to have someone coming to the House later and saying one department has been overlooked. Once you phrase a question, is the Government doing so and so, there is a tremendous search goes on and in many cases this is a waste of the taxpayers' money to no purpose whatever.

Mr. Starr: I was very much taken with the argument, but if that argument is factual why is it that we look at question No. 43 and find it has been standing since April 6, which is about nine weeks. It could have been answered in 15 minutes, and yet it is unanswered in nine weeks.

Mr. Chatterton: I was interested in the comment of the President of the Privy Council that the problem of oral questions and questions on the Order Paper might be considered. I put this suggestion forward briefly. The reduction in time for oral questions is on a trial basis. If that proposal is successful or acceptable, it will depend upon the extent to which backbenchers feel their questions are being answered. In the interest of keeping

the oral question period short, may I suggest to the President of the Privy Council that questions placed on the Order Paper should be answered within a certain period of time, and after the expiry of that time the appropriate Minister would either give the answer or give an explanation to the House for the cause of the delay. I know that in many cases questions require lengthy periods for answers to be obtained. If a Minister were required, after a period of seven or ten days, to give an answer or else an explanation, this would satisfy the Member putting forward the question. If such a practice were followed, questions which would normally be put during the oral question period would be put on the Order Paper, thus reserving the oral question period for more appropriate questions.

Mr. Douglas: In order to save time, Mr. Chairman, I wonder if I might make a suggestion now to the President of the Privy Council? I recognize we are not going to be able to cover the whole field in the time we have left. If I remember correctly, one of the recommendations of the Speaker's Committee last year was that we might set up a Standing Committee on Procedure to discuss some of these matters we have been discussing tonight, such as trying to work out some equitable arrangement on the question period and the matter we were discussing yesterday concerning some technique for written appeals of Speakers' rulings, for the purposes of establishing a precedent rather than dealing with the immediate matter before the House. Both these items could be referred to such a Standing Committee if it were set up.

I wonder if the President of the Privy Council, between now and the time this matter is going to be wound up tomorrow, might consider providing in paragraph 10 that a Standing Committee on Procedure be established. If the House is going to be asked, after this trial period ends at the end of the next session, to review these changes it would seem useful to have a Standing Committee which had been studying the whole matter of the extent to which these new rules have been satisfactory to all concerned. Then if these new rules were brought up for ratification or amendment, we would have some concrete proposals to place before the House. I believe such a Standing Committee might well be set up and could have plenty to employ itself with in the next year.