

Meetings of House and Standing Committees

Indeed, a few weeks ago, perhaps a month, the hon. member for St. John's East made a formal presentation for consideration by the Chair and I subsequently delivered myself of a three-page opinion saying that, while I recognized the importance of the matter, I was not sure there was anything that the Chair was able to do except perhaps to try to bring together representatives of the different parties. I undertook at that time to take this initiative and I followed up on my promise. There have been subsequent discussions in the Speaker's chambers with representatives of the different parties. I brought to their attention, as earnestly as I could, the point made by the hon. member for St. John's East, which was repeated today, and I gathered the understanding was that there would be a discussion of this matter.

All hon. members will realize that the solution to this very serious problem must lie in a change of the rules. Unfortunately, the Speaker has no power to change the rules. We were told that the Committee on Procedure and Organization would be going on a special mission during the next day or so, I believe, and these very distinguished representatives of the different parties, I suggest, might take this opportunity to review once again the problem that has been raised today.

I realize the difficulty here, which is obvious. When we have, as we have today, seven committees sitting in the afternoon and five in the evening it is very difficult to expect a large number of hon. members to be in attendance in the House to debate a matter as important as the one that will be debated later on. What more I can do than I have done already is difficult for me to conceive, except that the matter having been brought up again I will renew my submissions on behalf of hon. members to the House leaders, the very distinguished representatives of the different parties, in the hope that some agreement can be found to alleviate the difficulty and perhaps solve the problem.

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Speaker, I should like to raise another point of order which I would ask Your Honour to consider at the same time. The government house leader and those responsible are able to get away with the business of scheduling a number of committees to sit while the House is in session because of what I consider to be an illegal practice that has crept into our procedure. I should like Your Honour to take this matter under advisement and rule upon it.

I refer to the committees of this House being allowed to sit and hear witnesses notwithstanding the fact that, according to the rules of the House, they are not allowed to operate without a quorum. That is an illegal practice which allows the government to get away with scheduling 14 committees to meet today while the House is sitting.

Mr. Woolliams: May I make a suggestion, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I hear the parliamentary secretary it might be helpful to hear the hon. member for Calgary North.

Mr. Woolliams: Mr. Speaker, may I say I agree with the hon. member for St. John's East. I opposed the rule

[Mr. Speaker.]

changes, and I suggest this problem can only be solved by setting up a legislative committee to take care of legislation. What we are trying to do is to get legislation through all of these committees at once and we just do not have enough manpower to do it. It seems to me that some legislatures do have legislative committees, which are usually large committees that sit much as we sit in committee of the whole House to study bills clause by clause. I throw that suggestion out if we are not going to go back to the former rules, which I think were much superior to the new ones that are not working at all.

Mr. Jerome: If I may briefly reply, Mr. Speaker, to the point of order that has been raised, may I say at the outset that I understand the concern of the hon. member for St. John's East, and indeed other opposition members who addressed themselves to this point. However, at the conclusion of the question period, which I take it is generally acknowledged to be the time when attendance in the House is at its optimum, only 50 per cent of all opposition parties uniformly across the board were present. So it is no wonder they are concerned about staffing committees.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Jerome: Be that as it may—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I am having some difficulty in hearing the representations being made by the parliamentary secretary. My impression was that after I had heard the submissions made by the hon. member for St. John's East, the hon. member for Timiskaming and the hon. member for Lotbinière, no member rose to my right. If the hon. member did rise I accept his word for it and apologize for not recognizing him. Fortunately for me, perhaps, a second point of order was raised by the hon. member for St. John's East which might technically give the hon. member the occasion to reply. Perhaps he should try to limit himself to the second point raised by the hon. member for St. John's East.

Mr. Nystrom: On a question of privilege, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Jerome: I do, however, Mr. Speaker, want to hasten to point out that the *Votes and Proceedings* referred to by the hon. member for St. John's East—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. member should resume his seat when I call him to order.

Mr. Crouse: Learn the rules, Jerome.

Mr. Speaker: When an hon. member rises on a question of privilege, the Chair must recognize him.

Mr. Nystrom: Mr. Speaker, a few moments ago the hon. member stated that only 50 per cent of the members of the opposition parties were present in the chamber. I might point out that 17 of our 23 members were here. Of the six who were not, two are ill. Therefore the hon. member is not reflecting the truth in making outrageous statements like that.

Mr. Speaker: This is an indication of the thought that I have always had, namely that not much can be achieved