

Supply

services of this House and make it more functional and more credible.

[English]

Mr. John Williams (St. Albert): Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening to discuss the concurrence of the main estimates placed before this House.

I would like to congratulate the hon. whip on the government side for his fine speech and his Gagliano plan that he talked about. I was hoping that his Gagliano plan does not become a Galileo plan and they revert to star gazing rather than getting the job done.

He also said that they want to give an example starting with themselves to demonstrate to the country that they are prepared to provide leadership. I cannot think of a better opportunity than this evening when they get the opportunity to provide leadership in the vote we will have later on the estimates because there are two things that concern us as Reformers. One is to give Parliament the opportunity to get back into its real role of passing its opinion on the estimates rather than rubber stamping what the government lays in front of the House.

• (1915)

There are two elements that have denied Parliament the opportunity to fulfil its role. One is the convention of confidence which has prevented this House from being able to express its opinion on the estimates. The other is excessive party discipline by the government in power.

These two elements when combined have led to the fiscal rubber stamping by the House of Commons once the estimates have been reported back to this House by the committees which were supposed to have examined them beforehand. I say supposed because quite often the committees do not even address the main estimates before they are tabled in the House and through convention and party discipline the House is forced to concur. Therefore it is a sham and a mockery of the role of Parliament to control the public purse.

The traditional role which Canada inherited in many aspects and in many forms from the government and traditions of the British parliamentary democracy is that the Canadian House of Commons reviews the government's proposed expenditures. We inherited that tradition from the British parliamentary democracy. It is outlined and enshrined in the British North America Act, 1867.

This theory goes back a long way and is based on certain principles. The crown must come to this House and request funds on the advice of the crown's ministers. In Canada, the requests originate from the Governor General on the advice of cabinet, which forms the government, to this House of Commons in the form of recommendations. As in Britain, it is the

House of Commons which grants or denies—and let me emphasize or denies—the requests for funds after having reviewed them.

In theory this House has the authority to grant or deny the elected government's request for funding of expenditures it wishes to make in the upcoming year. Unfortunately, as I said, because of the convention of confidence and excessive party discipline we have made a mockery and a sham of the process. It has been many a long year since we have seen this House exercise its prerogative to express its real opinion on the estimates laid before it.

The record of this House in making reductions to the government's expenditures at this stage in the estimates process has been a complete and dismal failure. It is a fiscal disgrace and an abomination. Since 1969 the House of Commons annual review of the estimates has resulted in a reduction on percentage terms of only one-millionth of one per cent. By one-millionth of one per cent have we in this House reduced the estimates in the last 20-odd years that they have been laid before this House. That is an absolute disgrace and my colleagues agree with me. Listen to them over here.

The last time this House exercised its prerogative was in 1973, 21 years ago. It was a Liberal government, albeit a minority government, and that is when conventions of confidence really do matter. The government at that time, when confidence really did matter, allowed a reduction in the estimates. Ever since then Liberal governments and Tory governments—the only governments we have had—have refused to allow any further reductions in the estimates.

Tonight the government said, and I quote the hon. government whip: "Give an example starting with ourselves". That is a direct quote of what he said. Now is a wonderful opportunity for government members to say that the convention of confidence and strict party discipline need not necessarily apply any more and this House is going to demonstrate the open government they so liberally campaigned upon last fall. This is their opportunity to realize upon that commitment they made to Canadians, to express the will of this House and reduce the estimates as laid before us.

• (1920)

The amount was \$20,000 out of the entire government expenditure which was around \$60 billion at that time. The government cut \$19,000 from the Department of Labour for an information program. We talk about advertising and polls today and I think we should cut them as well, but it cut \$19,000. It cut \$1,000 out of the salary of the president of the CBC. There must have been a tiff with him at that point in time. I think Reformers have a tiff with the CBC today and maybe we should cut more than \$1,000 out of his salary, but we are not recommending that at the moment.