

Supply—Privy Council

Mr. Gleave: Mr. Chairman, I should like to ask the hon. member a question. How can we in the opposition oppose someone who is not here?

Mr. Mongrain: Mr. Chairman, I will have to ask the hon. member to repeat his question.

Mr. Gleave: How can we do our duty as opposition members in opposing the wishes of the government when members of the cabinet to whom we wish to direct questions are not here? How can anyone oppose someone who is not present?

Mr. Mongrain: Mr. Chairman, I do not think my hon. friend is being serious. Members of the opposition have many opportunities to oppose the government by voting and making interjections. Those ministers who are not here at the time of questions will be here at some time. I do not think there are very many questions of such urgency they must be answered the same day.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matte: Mr. Chairman, I would also like to express my views which could boil down to a few points.

First of all, it seems that this decision by the government lessens the importance of the representatives of the people. One would think that because the government has been elected by the majority, it is leaning on the power of numbers to lessen the importance of the opposition. One gets the impression, especially after listening to the hon. member for Trois-Rivières (Mr. Mongrain), that the party is arrogant enough to think that it can do anything because it is in office. That is what the hon. member for Trois-Rivières has just made clear to us.

It seems to me that the importance of being a representative of the people in the house should not be undermined to that point. If the cabinet does not feel strong enough to answer the opposition adequately, the consequences should not be borne by the representatives of the people. That is my impression; and how can it be explained that ministers are not there, as responsible ministers, for a few minutes every day, to answer questions. Is that not a clear indication that the representatives of the people have no importance and that it matters more to give precedence to something else over them? That is my impression.

It is for this reason that such arrogance displayed by the government, by its decision

[Mr. Mongrain.]

which deprives us of the possibility to question the ministers as we would like, is unthinkable. Why, Mr. Chairman, should these questions be postponed, as suggested by the government? It is very difficult to get an answer to an urgent or spontaneous question when the minister who would be able to give us the information we seek is not in the house. That is why it is absolutely necessary for the designated ministers to be present in the house. Everybody, even those who have an urgent question to ask, will understand that it is quite natural that the representatives of the people be the first to put their questions to the ministers concerned. I think people will not only understand that, but they will agree to put off a meeting till later, in order to allow a minister to defend his department in the house. I do not see why a matter of a few minutes or at most a few hours should inconvenience a minister so much.

Then, we get the impression that the government wants to reduce the importance of the whole house, especially of the opposition, by shortening the question period, or by boycotting it purely and simply.

Once more, I come back to the fact that the hon. member for Trois-Rivières has unquestionably demonstrated, by his own arrogance, that this is indeed the attitude of the cabinet, which has almost decided to boycott us.

Mr. Mongrain: Would my hon. friend allow a question?

Mr. Matte: Certainly.

Mr. Mongrain: Mr. Chairman, my hon. friend talked of regular attendance in the house and I am going to ask him a very polite question. Has he ever counted how many times the leader of his party has been absent from the house? He too was elected in order to sit in the house.

Mr. Laprise: Mr. Chairman, I rise on a point of order.

The member for Trois-Rivières has just pointed out that the leader of the Ralliement Cr ditiste (Mr. Caouette) is absent. I must tell him—he probably does not know and cannot be blamed—that the leader of the Ralliement Cr ditiste, the member for T miscamingue, is not here because he is now in his riding due to the passing away of his father-in-law.

Mr. Mongrain: Mr. Chairman, it is customary in the house to express our condolences when someone passes away. I therefore take this opportunity to extend my condolences.