

Supply

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to wade into this interesting debate on the subject of the government's estimates for the 1992-93 fiscal year.

The exercise sounds simple enough. We are basically debating and voting on an appropriation of \$34.9 billion. That is probably the largest block of money that Parliament has authorized and it is doing it in a year of recession and a year of difficulty in our economy.

The total appropriation is actually \$48.9 billion but interim supply provided the other funds. I find it remarkable to think that this amount of money is being appropriated here tonight when I know how little scrutiny that spending has had in the House of Commons and in the committees. I think that is an unfortunate thing. The rules that exist have evolved over decades and centuries. I can say quite honestly the vote that will approve the spending of \$48.9 billion minus the interim, has barely even seen the light of day by the public.

• (2120)

In the Solicitor General's area where I work in the House of Commons, large sums of money are involved. Canadians know it takes a lot of money to run and operate various levels of government. There is one in particular I want to note because it has received no scrutiny. Most members will say: "Well, it is in the estimates somewhere. You have the Part III of the Estimates document". My answer to that is sadly, it is not. That agency is called the Communications Security Establishment. We actually do not know how much money it spends because the figure is buried and for reasons peculiar to government in the area of national security, we are not told. The guesstimate is the amount is \$250 million, but we do not know and we do not know what they spend it on. That is just not right.

I am putting on the record the fact it is happening. I will be required to vote tonight and my party will probably take the usual opposition stance in relation to an appropriation bill like this. I want it known members opposite are approving an expenditure guessed at \$250 million and they do not know where \$1 of it is going. That is not what this procedure was meant to do.

I know members opposite did not create the procedure. I am trying to say the system needs reform in a major way. The rules of the House provide the estimates,

as presented in this House and passed through committees, are deemed to be adopted this past May 31. Even the rules say: "What the heck", if you do not have an opportunity to review the details of the expenditure or have the opportunity to ask the questions. If the government-appointed chair of your committee has decided the committee just is not able to sit and does not call a meeting, then I guess the questions do not get asked.

I should say I am not advised of any case where a committee has been prevented from doing its work. I am sure all committees have made some effort.

Sadly, I heard someone say the hours and effort spent by members in reviewing estimates this year was approximately one third the hours spent the previous year. I do not think we are losing interest, but it does indicate the system simply is not working.

There is no real accountability of the government to Parliament and through Parliament to its electors. There is at election time, but on a day to day basis, on a fiscal year basis, on an estimates basis there simply is not. There is nothing at risk. A majority government knows in every case the appropriation will be approved and questions will not be asked.

Today at liaison committee, the Auditor General appeared and made some very constructive comments about how the process could be improved. I do not know where that will go, but members seem to be quite interested in that.

In comparison, our U.S. friends have an appropriation system where committees of their houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives, actually approve every item of expenditure. If it is not approved in committee vote by vote, the money is not spent and it is not approved. That is not the case here. We get one vote tonight and that is all. The tone of the debate here today and in previous debates has been fairly general. I cannot help but note that a lot of the discussion of the previous member had to do with how well the government is doing with the economy. Precious little was said about the real issue in the debate; that is, the expenditure of the \$48.9 billion. That is a sad thing. I have been here for part of the day and opposition members are doing the same thing. I want to try to focus to that precise issue, the actual estimates procedure.