

Mr. Nowlan: Thank you for that gratuitous advice; it is worth what we paid for it.

Mr. Faulkner: We are doing what we can for you.

Mr. Sharp: The designation of days on which particular ministers will be questioned makes sense from the point of view of this House, on all sides, including the opposition, and of course in the interest of governmental administration. It would make the question period an even better show.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Would the minister accept a question before he leaves that point? In view of his interest in the question period being a better show, as he puts it, would it not be a good idea for all the ministers to be here just to see what is going on?

Mr. Sharp: There is nothing that I enjoy more than being here to watch the fun, but there are occasions when even I put other business ahead of just watching, and I do believe it would be in the interest of the House and of the country if some way could be found to direct questions to ministers at particular times so they could be here well prepared and able to satisfy the curiosity of the members.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): In a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure.

Mr. Sharp: The House will once again be asked to come to terms with the question of the redistribution of parliamentary seats. As hon. members know, there is a deadline of December 31 beyond which, under current legislation, consideration of this matter cannot go. I have reason to believe that there is sufficient consensus on this question among the parties, resulting from discussion in the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the last parliament, to enable a bill to be introduced in time for it to be approved before the end of the year, and that will be the government's intention.

The question of the independence of parliament, the freedom of hon. members from outside attachments which might exercise undue influence on the conduct of parliamentary business, is one which has been examined in the green paper on conflict of interest. It is the government's intention that the House, through the appropriate committee, once again be seized of this urgent question.

It is my concern to devise a more efficient and speedy machinery for supplying information adequately and accurately in reply to members' questions on the order paper. I would point out that we are not yet through the debate on the Speech from the Throne and already there are well over 400 questions on the order paper. I would solicit the co-operation of hon. members in avoiding duplication of questions, avoiding matters of minor urgency, answers to which could be obtained by simply asking the department, or matters of unnecessary complexity and amplitude. Many times—and I suggest this from experience in the House as a minister for many years—fishing expeditions which are enormously expensive and produce much irrelevant information can be avoided by advance consultations with the minister concerned or, if need be, with the President of the Privy Council.

The Address—Mr. Sharp

Under the rules of 1968, the standing committees perform a major portion of the parliamentary workload. Under my predecessor as House leader, the performance capacity of the committees was strengthened by staff allocations and budgeting of time. I would hope that consideration might be given to stabilizing committee membership so that members can maintain a continuing attachment to committees in which they are interested. In effect, the practice of platooning memberships should be carefully examined from the aspect of its impact on the really serious and effective work being accomplished by a number of committees.

There will be agreement, I am confident, that the standing committees have become an effective medium for channelling expert and informed opinion on complex and involved questions before the House and in that respect, too, they are providing a useful parliamentary service. In my various ministerial capacities when I have appeared before parliamentary committees on many occasions, I have seen a gradual evolution in the functioning of these committees. When I think of how much more effective and informed these committees are today than they were, say, 11 years ago when I first entered the ministry, I feel that the rules under which we are now proceeding and the way in which parliament is using the standing committees make it evident that we are on the right track. Presumably we can do better, but I think we could do better if we had a more permanent kind of attachment to committees and a building up of more expertise on the part of individual members.

It would no doubt appear curious to present-day Canadians if parliament closed its doors against the media and persisted in viewing its debates as a purely private matter. Yet it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the principle was accepted of an overriding public interest in the fullest possible coverage of parliamentary business. Parliament once claimed the right of privacy against the Stuart kings, and even now there is nothing in the rules of procedure to guarantee the presence of strangers, even the media, in the House. Nevertheless, open and impartial coverage of the parliamentary process remains an essential element of a free, democratic society.

In an age when public assemblies are constantly in danger of being overtaken by events, piecemeal reforms are not enough; there must be a unifying element providing a matrix of dedication to the principle of participation by legislators, administrators and citizens. Since the number of Canadians who are able to participate directly in or attend important parliamentary debates is restricted by available time, cost of travel and lack of opportunity, for many the only means of participation is through coverage by the media. This brings me to the question of broadcasting the proceedings of the House of Commons. This question has been considered on several occasions by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization and a number of important findings have been published, including those of the second report of the committee in June, 1972, which favoured television broadcasting in principle and recommended additional technical studies.