

Supply

The way to do that is to do something like the Senate did with the Department of Public Works some five or six years ago and to give a committee a mandate to look at a department and its five year plan. We could have real accountability, and departments—and I include officials—would have to answer to parliamentarians for their actions. Parliamentarians could say, "Instead of the policy you are following, we think you should go another way." Those reports would be read by the government. They would be examined by the public, and they would be taken seriously. The reports we have now as far as the estimates are concerned are not worth very much, unless there is a rebellion on the government side and five or six members of the government decide they want to kick the government out. However, that is not very smart, unless we want to have an election.

What we have now is not really an examination or the accountability of the government to Parliament. If I were to vote against my government and be confronted with an election, that would be somewhat irresponsible. It would be irresponsible for any group of Members of Parliament privately to decide we should have an election at a certain time.

The third part of my speech is related somewhat to the second part with respect to the estimates. I believe we should do a little bit of the same thing with legislation. I think there is value in the parliamentary system, versus a congressional system, in having the majority, that is the government, propose the legislative timetable and propose a philosophical framework. However, once that is done and once the whole House of Commons has voted on a resolution—which could be ten pages long—why not let a committee of Parliament write the legislation? Why not give it the time and hire the staff and have it write the legislation? I have reflected on this a little. I am not a lawyer or a draftsman, but I do not understand why a civil servant who works in the Department of Justice or in the Privy Council can write legislation while any person from the public cannot write legislation. If that were done, members of Parliament would feel they were part of the legislation. If there was a conflict and if something were to block somewhere, it would block on a question of policy and not on some picayune matter which has to do with drafting. As a matter of fact, one could suggest that the government would not have to keep so many of the officials who write legislation now. People in the country would probably develop expertise in the drafting of legislation, and they could work for Members of Parliament or for parliamentary committees.

Mr. Dionne (Northumberland-Miramichi): There would be a lot of unemployed lawyers.

Mr. Breau: In the fourth part of my speech I want to deal with the question of policy formulation. The Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Smith), the hon. member for Rosemont and a few others, including the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker), have talked about parliamentary task forces. In this Parliament where we tend to think we are in a great crisis and the institution is breaking down, it is paradoxical that there has been, in my

view, an important parliamentary reform in this session. I was involved in two parliamentary task forces, and I do not say this only because I was involved in them, but the setting up of parliamentary task forces has demonstrated an important reform in attitude. It was not really a great structural reform, but it was an important reform in attitude. I know the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton is proud of that because he was part of the government, the former government, which in a sense seeded the idea. When the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) formed the government the last time, he found this idea appealing and felt it a good way to involve parliamentarians. That has been an important reform of this Parliament. Never before have Members of Parliament been so involved and so effective in providing policy. That is not proper accountability, and it is not proper examination of legislation or estimates, but in terms of policy formulation I think it has been a great reform. Most, if not all, reports are unanimous. Members from the different parties have been able to agree to a coherent political statement. That is a very important reform and it worked because of members' attitudes. First of all, the subject was chosen by the government and therefore was on the political agenda of the government. It expected a report and wanted the opinion of parliamentarians. Also, it was obvious from the start—because the chairmen were proposed publicly by the Prime Minister—that there would not be the usual kind of party discipline directed to the subject. In the parliamentary task forces that I chaired—and I suppose it was the same in the others—when we first sat down with the opposition it was obvious that the Liberal members were free of party discipline. We were free to hire such staff as the opposition would agree to and were free to go wherever we thought it made sense to go in terms of policy orientation. As soon as that was clear, members of the opposition—who after all are here to do a job for their constituents—as soon as they realized that their opinion was worth something, they worked positively. Any disagreements were disagreements of philosophy, of policy, of substance. Once disagreements are reduced to those terms, it is easy to work them out. With skilful draftsmen it is easy to get around problems and to come up with a statement that is not so diluted that it does not make sense.

• (2110)

I have spoken on four different aspects of this matter, Mr. Speaker. The first is parliamentary life. I want to stress again that we must do away with this matter of surprise votes. Members of Parliament have to be free to go back to their constituencies without worrying about votes. Then there is the question of the bells, the question of voting, the question of fixed adjournments, and it seems to me that we should deal with them very quickly. I do not understand why we do not.

The other three aspects of the matter are estimates, legislation and policy formulation. With regard to these three I believe we must provide a better committee system and rely upon it more.