

*The Address—Hon. M. Lambert*

thereabouts. All that great program to take the legislature to the public no longer exists. It is only when ministers, in reply to a question, give an answer which is of public interest that there is a clip taken of the minister. Backbenchers never enter the picture, of course, unless they position themselves behind ministers.

● (1222)

The comment about what may have been some shifting around here on Friday afternoon, when frankly there are not many members in the House—there never have been and there never will be—ignores the fact that members have timetables to keep, airline schedules to follow, and that great distances have to be travelled by hon. members to get to their constituencies where they have important things to do. They also have families and, as members of parliament, they have the right of access to their families just as anybody else has. Somehow the public seems to forget that. Members of parliament are nailed to their desks here from Monday morning at the opening of the session until Friday at five o'clock when the session closes. I say that comment was utter tripe, utter nonsense.

Let me say something about the nature of this debate. I raised this point with Mr. Speaker the other day and I regret that he did not wish to listen fully to my argument, as I think he should have. This debate is for the purpose of discussing the Speech from the Throne. By tradition it has been reserved for backbenchers. Government ministers review certain aspects of policy, but it is for backbenchers to raise problems, to report from their constituencies, and in fact to report to their constituencies from this chamber.

But what has happened in this debate, Mr. Speaker? The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has been the first to admit that into this throne speech debate has been inserted a mini-budget. That has been done perfectly legally, but it was done, said the Prime Minister, to save time, or so he alleged. I ask, whose time? The government's time at the expense of the backbenchers, who would under normal circumstances, and who should under all circumstances, have the opportunity of discussing the throne speech through the full tenure of the debate, as well as discussing a budget.

We voted on an amendment last Thursday and we are voting on the main amendment tonight. There may be another amendment. But none of these amendments should have to do with the content of the budget statement or resolutions which were put forward by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chrétien) the other night. This would be pre-empting that particular debate. Depending upon who moves another amendment to be voted upon on day six, there will not be any expression of opinion by this House on the mini-budget until we get to the individual bills, primarily the income tax bill. It is on this expression of opinion by the House that the government must survive.

I doubt whether it has occurred to a number of cabinet ministers that we are still operating under a form of responsible government and that the government holds power for so long as it has the confidence of this House; but if subterfuges

[Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West).]

like introducing a mini-budget are used—indeed, it is a budget because there are major modifications in proposals put forward by the former Minister of Finance—then the House has had its opportunity foreclosed.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, there is one other point. While I must accept the rulings of the Chair on particular questions, I do not have to agree with them, and I do not agree with Mr. Speaker's ruling on my colleague's motion under Standing Order 26 on Friday. The subject matter was indeed most urgent. I say there is no case for insisting that debate on that particular item pre-empts the right of members to participate in the throne speech debate. But that is what has happened.

Under the rules, if Mr. Speaker had been prepared to accept the motion, debate on it could not have commenced until three o'clock on Friday afternoon. Members who were interested in that question—I would hope there would be many because it is a very serious matter—would then have had unlimited time to discuss the question until the debate was finished. But no, Mr. Speaker, it has been thrown into this debate, the Chair ruling on the basis that if members indicated they wished to discuss the Sudbury and Thompson situation, the Chair would recognize them. I say that is an improper insertion of that debate into this. Say over the weekend some other very important event had come up. Following the logic of Friday's decision by the Chair, that item too could be brought into this debate. I disagree with that and I record my disagreement publicly and as forcefully as I can.

In the same way I also object to being told, as I have quite often in the past, that subjects brought up for discussion under Standing Order 26 will have to form the subject matter of an opposition day. I participated in the formulation of the rules in 1968 and I know why provision was made for opposition days. In effect, they were a curtailment of the opportunities the House used to have, when dealing with motions, to introduce estimates, and also motions for interim supply.

Again in the spirit of so-called efficiency, emergencies are to be discussed at the expense of the opposition's time. By what right is that done? Emergencies and adjournments of the House are debates at the expense of government time, not that of the opposition. Should the occasion arise again this year, then this House can certainly expect to hear from me on this particular point.

I am eternally interested in the rights of the backbenchers on both sides of this House. They have been abused over the years on every occasion by this sacred white cow known as efficiency. It is the backbencher who gets in it in the neck. We can always improve, shall I say, the handling or expedition of business in this House, but in this regard let me warn hon. members, particularly those on the government side whose experience in the House may be somewhat limited. I will use the words of the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) that it is a long, long road that has not got some ash cans, and it is a long, long road that has no turning. What suits the government today can be a terrible, terrible restriction tomorrow when there is a change of power.