

Questions on Orders of the Day

might lead some to believe that this parliament acted differently from other parliaments, I looked up what had taken place in the United Kingdom since 1902, when a change was made.

Mr. Pickersgill: Could the hon. gentleman give me the page?

Mr. Diefenbaker: I should be glad to give the page numbers. I am glad the Secretary of State has this copy because apparently he did not read this particular portion during the statement he made recently. This is page 87, and here he will find set out the change that has taken place in the United Kingdom. We are shocked at the number of questions in this parliament. Well, making allowance for the fact that the United Kingdom house has 630 members, here is the general outline of developments there; the rest can be filled in later. In 1903, following the change in the rules, the number of starred questions was 2,544 and the number of unstarred questions was 110.

Mr. Pickersgill: I think the right hon. gentleman has made an error. There were 1,992 unstarred questions.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Yes, the record in 1902 was the record during the period when the changes were made in the rules. That is why I started in 1903. I have no objection to the 1902 figures. Let us go back to the year before that. In 1901 the total number of starred was 6,448. In 1902, up to May 5, the number was 2,917 and, after May 5, 2,415. Then the rules were changed. Let us now take the year 1950. The number of starred questions in 1950 in the British house was 7,971, and it rose all the way to 14,700. In 1959-60, the last date for which figures are available, the number of starred questions was 10,161 and the total number of all questions, starred and unstarred, ranged between 1950 and 1960 from 9,861 to 13,471.

This is a revealing situation. The reasons for the increase are set out at page 90. It says fluctuations of this character are to be expected in most forms of parliamentary activity. In part they reflect the political problems attracting the attention of members at different times and, in part, they reflect the size of the government's majority. It says that a vigorously led opposition facing a government with a small majority will try to harass ministers in all possible ways. That was the conclusion reached. In the United Kingdom, the question period is jealously guarded and zealously preserved. It has been described as the grand assize of the nation.

Now, sir, I come to your suggestions. I do not intend to go into them in great detail. A debate similar to the one which took

place here when we were discussing the setting up of a committee occurred in the United Kingdom in 1959-60, at which time Mr. Butler proposed to reduce the number of oral questions which might be asked by any member on any one day from three to two. I should like to deal with the statement you made, Mr. Speaker. First there is the principle:

The form of questions is governed by the terms of standing order 39, section 1, providing in part that in putting a question no argument or opinion is to be offered nor any facts stated, except so far as might be necessary to explain the question.

There would be no argument about that.

2. Questions should be offered only in connection with urgent and important matters of public concern when, because of immediacy, the regular procedure relating to questions cannot be utilized.

There is no question about that.

3. An explanation can be sought regarding the intention of the government, but not an explanation of opinion upon matters of policy.

4. Supplementary questions are matters of grace.

Well, Your Honour refers to Mr. Speaker Michener in that regard. I do not find that in the United Kingdom supplementary questions are in that position. After all, we do not follow the United Kingdom in every way in our parliamentary procedure, though we regularly quote May on that mother of parliaments.

Now, sir, we come to your own proposals:

1. In placing questions, hon. members seeking information from ministers will be expected to adhere to the rules governing questions as enunciated by my predecessors and as set forth—

And so on. To this I give 100 per cent support, because questions must be within the rules.

2. No more than two supplementary questions, which must be genuine supplementary questions and which, I remind hon. members, are matters of grace, might be asked.

I think this is one part of your recommendations which could go to the committee.

I would take it upon myself to select questioners in rough ratio to the number of hon. members comprising any one body in the house.

What does that mean? It means that the Liberal party would have 15 minutes and we would have 11 minutes. Sir, the 30 minutes would be used up very quickly if you proceeded on that basis to allocate the time during which members of the parties might ask questions, and the question period would become a simple routine. If members supporting the government started in to ask questions and you called on them in proportion to the total membership of the house, the opposition would find itself in a position where its rights had been greatly curtailed.

No more than 30 minutes would be allowed to elapse from the time on the clock when the first question was asked.