

Supply—Privy Council

Resources had gone to a meeting of the council of resource ministers in eastern Canada so he certainly could not be here. The minister must have known he was going—there was no emergency—and he should have made himself available on Monday and Tuesday when he was right here in the building. This is where the whole system is failing. Whoever dreamed up this idea, whether it was the Prime Minister, the President of the Privy Council or anyone else, instead of making the system more flexible and realistic has made it so rigid that it will never work.

We are not trying to oppose it for the sake of opposition or to cause the government embarrassment. That is not our sole reason. I recognize that we have to make our point by ridicule, but that is the only way in which we can do it in a ridiculous situation. That is all we can do in these ridiculous situations. We cannot meet the weight of the government's majority by just sitting here and being walked over. We have to point out to the public and to the house that this is a ridiculous situation. This is the only way in which we can deal with it.

This system might as well be dropped because it cannot possibly work in this rigid way. The very success of the question period depends on its flexibility and the ease with which unexpected situations are met. The ministers should be here when they can be here. Of course, if they are away for long periods of time, although it is difficult to understand the reason for it we would certainly not make an issue of it. When we know the Secretary of State for External Affairs is in New York, no one rises and asks why he is not here unless we have a suspicion he is staying down there to avoid questions.

If we had been given an opportunity we could have explained to the government before they initiated this system why it would not work. However, they decided not to consult us about it before they brought it into effect.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Is the hon. member saying that the opposition was not advised of this matter?

Mr. Aiken: The minister is using the very word which points out what the government did. It advised the opposition, it did not consult us.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Is the hon. member for Peace River saying he did not know about this proposition?

[Mr. Aiken.]

Mr. Baldwin: No, we are not saying that.

Mr. Aiken: I am saying that the President of the Privy Council advised us, but that is not consultation. Is that the way the President of the Privy Council will handle the committee on procedure? If it is and if he is only going to advise us what he will do, he will find some other proposals in as great a mess as they are now. There are a few members here who are perhaps not too brilliant but who have had a few years of experience. I know some of these proposals will not work because they have been tried and they failed. There is no use in the government coming along and saying they have a mandate, so they know everything. It is wrong for them not to consult us. We will accept a new idea if it is good, but this was a very bad one.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): I think there are some useful concessions in what the hon. member for Parry Sound-Muskoka said. In the first place, he was kind enough to indicate there was no sinister intent in what we did, although some of his colleagues have not been so generous in admitting that. But I would say to him in this regard, and I will deal with his last remark first, that I do not agree with his theory that the opposition should have a veto in this matter. I am prepared to concede that the hon. member may genuinely disagree with me on the way in which this house should operate, but just because he disagrees with me does not give him the right to say we cannot do this because he disagrees with it. I want to make this perfectly clear.

Mr. Hees: No one said that.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): The hon. member for Parry Sound-Muskoka was very successful in finding fault with the argument put forward by the hon. member for Prince Edward-Hastings. He conceded it was not to be expected that ministers would be here at all times when questions might be put. It seems to me it is obvious common sense and therefore it should be accepted that ministers cannot be in the house at all times. This is the fallacy in their argument.

Mr. Hees: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, I never said that at any time. It has always been recognized that ministers have to be away. When they do not have to be away they should be here in the house to answer questions, but when they are away on important business we have always agreed this is right and no questions have been raised.