

There are many other suggestions one could make about our committee work, Mr. Speaker. I think we need to specialize more than ever. We should be sitting more regularly and a great deal of attention should be paid to the conflicts that occur in committee sittings. Sometimes committees get going, there is a good chairman and a good group of members—a good rapport—and then they start to look into everything. They should, in my opinion, provide a priority for their work from season to season.

• (4:40 p.m.)

Some ministers pay a great deal of attention to committee work and others do not even know where the committee rooms are. I think that if a minister goes regularly before committees for passage of his estimates and passage of legislation as well as other important matters, the importance of the committees will be enhanced. A minister should not send his parliamentary secretary to deal with these matters, since a parliamentary secretary, with all due respect, has no way of answering some of the political questions that come up.

I feel that there is one important matter that was referred to by the parliamentary secretary. The committee system developed fairly quickly, and the government held the line—I do not criticize them for this—on amendments proposed in committee. Very reluctant was the government to accept any amendments. I think our committee system would be improved if the government accepted amendments moved in committee by opposition as well as government members. That would avoid the sort of clashes we have seen in the House. The other night we saw a parliamentary secretary standing up and moving amendments in the House. Now that the government has assessed the work of the committees, that would be one way it could add to the strength of the committee system.

I hope that this notice of motion is given good attention. I hope it will not be talked out, because it is a good notice of motion and the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland) deserves credit for bringing it forward. We will work, keeping in mind what he has suggested, to make our committee system better. In this day of communication, involvement and credibility it is important for the committees to be a strong arm of government and to create the right impression with the people. It is important for us to produce results that will make this a better nation.

Mr. John M. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): Mr. Speaker, I join other hon. members in congratulating the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland) for bringing forward this notice of motion. As the parliamentary secretary indicated, the government at the present moment is looking at the committee system with a view to discovering exactly how it has worked and what its successes and failures have been. We hope there will be an opportunity for the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization to discuss this question with the minister before any report or suggested changes are made to the House.

I think, when we examine the committee system, that it will be important to look, first, at the question of how it has affected the backbencher, the ordinary member of the House of Commons. I think that many of the high hopes the government and members of the opposition had for

Suggested Improvements to Committee System

the committee system when it was first introduced in its present form back in 1964 have not been justified. The reason is quite simple. Basically, Members of Parliament have not participated in committee work to the extent possible. They have not prepared themselves for committee work to the extent that they might or for debate in the House of Commons. The reason is not hard to find. Members of the House of Commons are more accustomed to speaking in the House and their experience has ill-prepared them for the kind of work which must be done in committees.

According to our concepts, the House of Commons was to be the forum for policy debates and for the discussion of broad, general principles and great issues. Committees, on the other hand, would be the forum for discussion of details of legislation. The actual things to be done were to be discussed in committee. The discussion was on a different plane. Whereas Members of Parliament had found it easier to speak in the House of Commons without preparation, since they could get away with statements that were not entirely accurate, they found in committee, for the first time, that their facts and interpretations could be challenged by experts. Consequently, their lack of preparation was not found compatible with the needs of committee work. The committee system brought parliamentarians, for the first time face to face with civil servants and ministers in a way which enabled meaningful dialogue to be undertaken.

Unfortunately, it has struck me from personal observation that Members of Parliament have not yet met that challenge. They have not met it, not because research facilities are not available to them but because they have not utilized to the full research facilities such as the Library of Parliament and other facilities which are available to them through their parties. I had high hopes for the committee system when it was first brought in, and I speak as chairman of a committee. Those high hopes have not been realized. I submit that the members of the House of Commons will need to revise the way in which they go about their work in committee.

One thing bothers me, and this has been alluded to by the parliamentary secretary. The whole concept of what the House of Commons is and how it should operate needs to be clarified. Mr. Speaker, I am a fervent believer in responsible government. That is to say, I am a fervent believer in the system under which parties are responsible for their actions. Personally, I sympathize with some views brought forward from time to time which suggest that individual members should be given much more freedom to express their opinions. However, the point is that we operate under a responsible system of government and if in the eyes of the electorate the government does wrong, the electorate has the opportunity to kick the government out at the next election. Therefore, responsibility is clearly defined.

If the government extends its jurisdiction beyond the House of Commons, so to speak, to the committees, it will need to face its responsibilities in those other jurisdictions, in committees, in the same way as it faces its responsibilities in the House. Such matters then become a question of confidence and a matter of importance to the government. The country would not be well served by a system in which responsibility is diffused over a wide