

Supply

coast. It was a very interesting and rewarding experience. I had a chance to meet Canadians all over the country and hear their concerns about the budgetary process. This is a very, very important part of our parliamentary responsibility. I also had a chance to study some of the institutions that exist for scrutinizing the budgetary process in this country and compare that with what is done in the United States. It seems to me that in this country we have fewer checks and balances than are available in the United States, and I should like to compare the two systems to show how important scrutiny is.

In the United States there is the House of Representatives and the Senate, either of which may stop a budgetary measure. There is also the executive branch which is totally separate from the legislative branch. The executive branch would be similar to our cabinet. Each institution can act as a check and balance on the public purse and on the others. We do not have that system in this country, Mr. Speaker. To a large extent that responsibility lies with each individual member of the House of Commons. If its members are to exercise that responsibility, then they must have some authority—perhaps that is going too far, but at least they must have some input into the decision on how tax money is spent.

When we arrive here as new members I do not think any of us expect to make momentous decisions that will shape the course of history in any significant way, but I think it is fair to say that our constituents expect us to be able to ask some basic questions once in a while. They do not expect us simply to vote yea or nay on an issue but they expect us to make useful suggestions that will be heeded. They expect us to ask why something is happening or why it is not happening. I think we must ask these questions about the budgetary process and the expenditure of tax money by the government.

Just to give an example before I call it six o'clock, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Moose Jaw (Mr. Neil) had a private member's bill—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): Order, please. It being six o'clock I do now leave the chair until 8 p.m.

At six o'clock the House took recess.

AFTER RECESS

The House resumed at 8 p.m.

Mr. Mayer: Mr. Speaker, when the House rose at six o'clock I was digressing somewhat to talk about some of the problems we encounter as individual members. The example I was attempting to use was one which referred to a private member's bill of the hon. member for Moose Jaw (Mr. Neil). It dealt with taking some \$9 million that had been collected from farmers during the life of the prairie farm administration act. When this act ceased to exist, the \$9 million was held by the government on behalf of producers. It was not distributed. Everyone agreed the money should be distributed to the farmers, but it has been held since 1972 despite the fact that

everyone agreed it should be distributed. Nothing has transpired, and almost ten years have passed since that time. I understand, however, the problem is to be solved soon. But in the meantime we have lost something like \$4,000 a day in interest on the \$9 million. When people outside of this institution see things like that going on about which everyone is agreed, it is small wonder people become concerned about the way this place functions.

● (2010)

I want to return now to the task before me tonight and that is to talk about the parliamentary process as it relates to the budgetary system. It seems to me there are three time frames surrounding a budget: the proposal stage of a budget, dealing with it in the House, and dealing with it after it is presented in the House on budget night. I refer first to pre-budget time during which the Department of Finance formulates a budget. There should be no reason why a minister of finance cannot let Canadian businessmen and taxpayers know what kind of tax changes are being proposed in an upcoming budget. If a minister of finance were to do that, it would be a signal to the taxpayers and to business people of Canada of what they might expect with regard to changes. This would also give people a chance for input into the budget. They could make submissions to the minister of finance. He would have the benefit of people's opinions as to how his proposed tax changes might affect the country. That would help the minister of finance prepare a better budget. There is not enough interaction in this country. There seems to be no reason to me why something like this should not take place, because it would benefit everyone.

A second concern many people have is with respect to budgetary secrecy. Admittedly, there are some legitimate concerns over budgetary secrecy having to do with people taking unfair advantage through prior knowledge of tax provisions or tax changes in a budget, for instance. That is understandable. But generally there are two concepts in the budget relating to secrecy.

I want to quote from a document entitled "Canadian Study of Parliament Group". In referring to the budget secrecy rule, we read with reference to budgetary secrecy:

In theory, it would seem to rest on two premises. The first is that no one should be able to gain a private advantage by reason of advance information about matters to be dealt with in a budget;—

That seems to be obvious to all of us in the House. The paragraph continues:

—the second is that all important statements of government policy ought to be announced first to the House of Commons.

Those are two general principles to do with the budget as it is prepared and presented in the House. I do not think many of us quarrel with that. But within those two premises, there is no reason why we could not open up the budgetary process considerably from what it has been in the past without calling into question or compromising those two basic premises. They should surround the budget in the way it is prepared and presented in the House.