

controversy. The committee itself asked that "it be empowered to consider matters connected with external affairs and report from time to time any suggestion or recommendation deemed advisable to the House of Commons.² Innocuous as this might sound today, it was totally unacceptable to the Government of that era as demanding powers that were far too wide, setting a dangerous precedent for other committees, and seriously affecting the order of business of the House.³ These were basically procedural concerns. A more serious objection came from the prime minister's principal secretary, Jack Pickersgill:

To give the committee the power to consider any matter connected with External Affairs and report any suggestion or recommendation comes very close to giving the committee power to recommend, if not to determine, foreign policy. This is the function of the government and it is difficult to see how confusion could be avoided if a committee of the House should, as would likely be the case, make recommendations which would be different from the views which the government, with the information at its command, thought it proper to recommend to the House.⁴

The Hon. Louis St. Laurent, who was acting minister at the time, thought that the committee would be satisfied if the Government merely referred the department's estimates to it, but Pickersgill still doubted, in view of the complexity and delicacy of international issues, whether it was wise to place officials in a position where they could be questioned in public about almost any aspect of the department's activities. Nevertheless, when the Conservatives suggested that the reference of estimates would suffice, the Government quickly agreed. For the Committee to go further would require a specific reference from the House.

Right from its inception, the Standing Committee on External Affairs became one of the more active committees of the House. During its first seventeen years it averaged 15 meetings lasting a total of 23 1/3 hours per year. The range varied from a low of 6 meetings cramed into one week in 1949 to a high of 27 when the Columbia River development was on the agenda in 1955. (See Table 1). In addition to holding the department accountable for its estimates, the foreign policy