

to question estimates in this fashion, then we may as well fold our tents and depart this place, because the whole purpose of this debate will have been subverted by the stand taken by the government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Caouette (Témiscamingue): Mr. Speaker, I have only a few words to say on this debate on procedure.

As the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen) said earlier, this procedure was, in my view, unanimously adopted and it was up to the Progressive Conservatives to move a different motion from the one they have moved today. I believe that we are in utter confusion. What is being sought is an amendment to the House Standing Orders to have the estimates discussed, not in the House, but in committee. We have had time to debate only some of the estimates, and for an hour and a half we have been debating what procedure we should follow in studying the estimates we have to vote tonight.

Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that if the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) had today moved a motion aimed at studying the recommendations of the Auditor General of Canada, whose task it is to check on government excesses in all departments, the motion would be much more acceptable and would deserve greater consideration from the House than the one now before us. In any case, we have to vote hundreds of millions of dollars this evening. We knew that beforehand. Why, on the days reserved for the opposition, did the member for Yukon or the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) or someone else, not move a motion two or three months ago so that we could debate it? But no, they have waited till the last minute. There will be a vote tonight at 9.45 and now the member for Yukon is prepared to withdraw his motion if the government agrees to debate the items one by one and to accept some amendments which we would adopt as they arise between now and 9.45 tonight.

Mr. Speaker, the Standing Order was unanimously adopted by the House.

Mr. Marcel Lambert (Edmonton West): That is not true.

Mr. Caouette (Témiscamingue): Mr. Speaker, I am afraid we are wasting valuable time when we should be discussing the important matter of votes. I myself intend to discuss some of them with regard to departments which, to my mind, do not deserve them. Let us attack those expenditures, let us attack the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury) if we want to, but let us do something. Let the hon. member for Yukon withdraw his motion or not, but let him know what he must do and then let him do it, so that we can get on with the discussion of the votes on which we will be voting this evening.

[*English*]

Mr. Speaker: If there are no further contributions to the very interesting procedural debate that we have had, I will make my own comments, which will be brief in relation to the length of time that we have spent on the discussion of this item.

My understanding of the situation is that the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) has placed on the order

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paper, as is his right, a notice of motion for consideration by the House on an allotted day, which is the last allotted day in this period. Normally, under ordinary circumstances, such a motion would be put by the Chair on the calling of orders of the day and debated for the rest of the time allotted for the consideration of government business until the time of adjournment.

As hon. members know, there are 25 such days set aside during the fiscal year or supply periods. In each period, two of the motions are subject to vote. The two voteable motions have been proposed to the House already, so this is not a voteable motion. The hon. member has brought forward a motion which is very interesting and original in form, and if hon. members had decided to proceed with it, certainly at the moment I can see no objection to it because it would have given the House an opportunity to consider certain specific items which the hon. member for Yukon or other members feel should be considered by the House.

The difficulty, as I see it, is that there would not be an opportunity to vote, and this is the difficulty with which we are faced. The hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) and the hon. member for Yukon have stressed that very point. Where they feel our Standing Orders fall short is that there is no opportunity for the House to express itself in a vote, not necessarily on an item in the estimates but on a reduced item.

Hon. members point to the fact that under our Standing Orders as they existed before 1968 there was an opportunity in committee of supply to vote on reduced items. But by decision of this House—and it has been mentioned that this was an unanimous decision of the House—it was decided to change that procedure, and instead of considering these votes in committee of supply it was suggested that these debates and votes should take place in the standing committees of the House. Under special procedures our estimates are now referred to different standing committees, and in each committee the estimates of a department or agency of the government are considered, and hon. members while considering those estimates have an opportunity to either vote for an item, against an item or to reduce an item. That is the right, privilege or opportunity which we had when we had a committee of supply that we have passed on to the standing committees.

● (1630)

It may well be that was not the intention of hon. members when they worked very diligently in reforming, changing or amending our rules in 1968. It may well be they were anxious to preserve an opportunity for the House itself, either in committee of supply, committee of the whole or in the House with the Speaker in the Chair, to vote to reduce an item, but I am not sure that this particular opportunity has been preserved. Obviously, in the last four years since the rules were changed there has not been that opportunity.

It may well be that hon. members want to change that procedure, and it may be that some interpretation of the rules will come forward in the weeks ahead which would make it possible for members to vote not only against an item but against part of an item. It is in an effort to obtain