

Attendance of Ministers in House

see the day when they will practically all be ministers over there.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Diefenbaker: I am glad the Prime Minister applauds, because that is what I had in mind as being a reason for the increase. So they will all be placed in two categories; those who have achieved, and those who hope to achieve, having started as parliamentary secretaries.

What has happened in the last week or ten days? Simply the government has decided that we shall not have our rights under the rules except as the Prime Minister may designate. It is natural that ministers will be absent. It is expected that from time to time they will be away on business and will not be able to be here. But, sir, when they are in Ottawa and this house is in session, during the period that is called the period of the orders of the day they should be here. Already the roster of ministers has had to be altered. What has happened in the last week or ten days has made a nightmare of the parliamentary rules in this country.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Diefenbaker: I am glad to hear the backbenchers jeer, but this is a fact. I have sat on both sides of the house, and I know there is nothing more trying than wondering day after day what the opposition is going to raise that day. I had that experience when the opposition was very small in number, but we did not try to throttle them. I can recall certain members whom I can call by name now, such as Mr. Pearson, Mr. Martin and Mr. Pickersgill, who made our lives far from enjoyable.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Diefenbaker: The applause from the back benches indicates that what was right when we were in government is wrong now that they are in government. I appreciate their assistance in clarifying the situation.

This system is wrong. I think in his heart of hearts, as he realizes the responsibility of the prime ministership and what it entails, the Prime Minister is beginning to realize that this system makes a caricature of the rules. It should certainly be referred to a committee. I would not have supported this in the beginning. I would have said that we as members have the right to demand that such

[Mr. Diefenbaker.]

matters be decided by the House of Commons, not by a coterie within the government. But the hon. member who made the motion and the seconder of the motion want to refer the matter to the committee on procedure. I say this has all the earmarks of translation into actuality of the immortal words of the Prime Minister last February following the defeat of the government when he said in effect, "We are your masters". Sir, we do not intend to be the government's servants.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has made one point quite clear to us. He has made it in two ways. First, when he submitted to us the revised roster of attendance he made it clear that on certain days there is to be in the house no minister for certain departments, as for example when the Minister of Transport and the Minister without Portfolio from Winnipeg are both absent on the same days. Second, he has made it clear in his statement today that the intention is that questions may be directed respecting certain departments only on certain days. I see the Prime Minister nodding his head that I am stating correctly what he is trying to do.

I will not repeat the things I have said before about what I think this does to the question period, but rather will simply refer in these few remarks to the kind of facts that you, Mr. Speaker, have to deal with in ruling on this question of privilege. The question which faces Your Honour is whether the government by itself, unilaterally, has the right to make this kind of change, to tell the house that for whatever period of time this system is in effect we may ask questions of certain ministers only on certain days.

• (3:00 p.m.)

The Prime Minister says no rule is being changed, and in a technical sense he could substantiate that point. The rule which I must cite, I must admit, is not as clear as we thought it was when we drafted it. I say "we" because it is a contemporary rule that has been introduced in our generation. I refer to standing order 39(5), which reads:

Before the orders of the day are proceeded with, questions on matters of urgency may be addressed orally to ministers of the crown—

There are many more words in addition about what Mr. Speaker may do if he feels the questions are not urgent, and so on. However, the pith of this order, so far as this