

Order Paper Questions

secretary it was slightly different from that which has been described. This is a point that interests me. Therefore, I want to straighten it out before we go further. If it is possible to amend legislation by a \$2 billion item in the estimates, is it possible to amend it by a \$1 item in the estimates? That is the point. Basically, since there was no complaint about occasionally amending legislation by an item in the estimates that was properly there, there ought not to be a complaint about it being done by a \$1 item. My understanding is that if it cannot be done by an item in the estimates, it cannot be done where the item is there properly with every dollar and cent, comma and dot, or it cannot be done by a \$1 item, equally.

The question of estimates, in my mind, is whether there is a limit to what can be done by placing an item in the estimates, whether it be a full and substantial item or a \$1 item; or is that limit reached when the proposal contained in the estimate is to amend legislation? That is the point that seems to be at issue.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, if that is your understanding of the point raised by the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council, I shall be glad to deal with it in a moment or two. The other comment I would like to make on the remarks we have had from across the way is that no matter how many precedents the hon. member may be able to cite, if they are wrong, and if the House is being asked to repeat a wrong committed several years ago, that is no reason for us to continue committing that wrong.

I say, with respect—and I think what is in my mind now deals with at least part of what Your Honour has raised—that at times \$1 items are simply an abuse. They may not be illegal, but are simply an abuse. There are other times when \$1 items, in the view of some of us, are out of order and should be so designated by Your Honour. Let me put it yet another way. There are times when by a \$1 item all the government is doing is, in effect, voting money; for example, when a \$1 item proposes that money voted in the main estimates for a specific purpose be deemed to be available for a different purpose. I do not find that offensive. The government could achieve its end by letting money which was there for the original purpose lapse and by putting into the estimates the actual number of dollars it wants for the new purpose. In the end, no extra money would be spent. There would have been a higher appropriation and some of it would lapse. So when the government uses \$1 items to cancel spending for a certain purpose and provide for the spending of the same money for another purpose, it would seem to me this is within the four corners of an appropriation act. It is a form of appropriating money, which is what a supply bill is all about. But when a \$1 item is used to amend a statute other than an appropriation statute the government is certainly indulging in an abuse because it is denying parliament the right to discuss that other statute and deal with it in the normal way.

● (1550)

Let me take an example from last session. There was a \$1 item to create Loto Canada. Some of us felt this involved the

[Mr. Speaker.]

creation of a corporation and that it should have been the subject of a special act of parliament. But it was done by way of a \$1 estimate. The result was that we did not have an ordinary bill, with first reading, second reading, reference to committee, third reading, and so on. Furthermore, the consideration of Loto Canada in the last session was put under a form of closure. It was put into an appropriation bill in respect of which there was no discussion on the floor of the House. There was some discussion in the committee, but when the bill came back it had to be dealt with under the form of closure which applies to supply bills. It seems to me that when the government does this, it ought to do so by way of legislation. It is legal to do as I have described, but it certainly is an abuse of the right of parliament to deal with legislation without going through the normal stages and thus making it subject to an indirect form of closure. We have experienced closure in various ways, for example, through the operation of Standing Order 75C in the present session, and there may be further examples.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Some hon. members across the way are applauding. That shows what they think of parliament. Let me say, further, that I think Via Rail Canada is a substantial proposition and is one which ought to be the subject of legislation. I will come to my point in a few moments, that it should not be a \$1 item, but in the context of what I have been saying, if that proposal for Via Rail Canada were made the subject of a bill, that bill would be presented for first reading, second reading, and so on. But no: it is a \$1 item in the estimates, so it has already been to the appropriate committee and it will be back among the estimates which will be voted on en masse tomorrow at 9.45 p.m. Parliament will be called upon then to deal with a major measure which is outside the confines of the voting of money without having an opportunity for debate. Therefore I say this amounts to an indirect way of imposing closure.

The other day when the hon. member for Vegreville, I believe it was, questioned the President of the Treasury Board on this point, the minister's reply was a revealing one. He said, in effect, "We feel that way about it, too, but the limitation upon parliamentary time is such that we cannot deal with all these things by way of separate bills." This is an indication, Mr. Speaker, that the government is putting a number of measures into supply bills because it cannot find the time in which to deal with them through ordinary parliamentary procedures. I suppose that if some day the government decides it wants to bring home the British North America Act, and parliament is running short of time, we will find a \$1 item in the estimates deeming the British North America Act to be a Canadian statute. That is no more far-fetched than some of the things which are being considered now. Some of these things are an abuse of the rights of parliament, an abuse of our privileges, an abuse of our right to debate. Maybe in some instances that is all one can say; they are an abuse. But in other instances I believe they are contrary to the rules and are out of order.