

Supply—Treasury Board

is suffering and committees are not able to do the job because they lack the staff, and members lack the time they would like to devote to these matters.

I would therefore ask this committee of the whole, the government and the standing committee to consider the idea that instead of having every department referred every year we should have, say, six departments referred every year, so that in the life of an ordinary parliament you would have all departments given one thoroughgoing scrutiny in a standing committee.

Mr. Churchill: Mr. Chairman, I just happened to come in at the appropriate time when someone was talking about the committee system of the House of Commons. I wish to add my protest in this respect. I think that the House of Commons has gone crazy over committees and the house itself has suffered accordingly. This is a committee of the House of Commons, a committee of the whole house, and should be used as it used to be used in days gone by, instead of hiving off small committees scattered all over the buildings on parliament hill.

You can be sure of maintaining a quorum in the committee of the whole house, but you cannot be sure of maintaining a quorum in some of our smaller committees. Time and time again we hear of committees meeting and waiting for a half an hour or longer for a quorum before they can proceed with their work. I say, Mr. Chairman, let us revert to half way between this system and the old, as has been suggested by the hon. member for Kamloops. Let this committee of the whole house deal with estimates to the fullest extent that is reasonable and from time to time refer estimates for more so-called detailed study by committees.

There is some advantage to this detailed study by committees once in a while, but not every year. Senior departmental officials have told me that burdensome as it is to appear before a house committee on estimates, nevertheless it is a spur and a help to them in their work because they are put on their mettle, they have to know their job and be able to answer the questions of interested members of the House of Commons. I would not subject them to this every year, but as the hon. member for Kamloops has quite properly said, perhaps six departments each year should be referred to our smaller committees. This system might very well satisfy the house.

[Mr. Fulton.]

As a matter of fact some years ago we had a committee on estimates. The idea with regard to that committee was just about what has been proposed by the hon. member. But I warn the House of Commons against the proliferation of committees. I have seen during the last two years the deterioration of the committee of the whole house and the House of Commons itself because hon. members have been occupied elsewhere. Of course the general public think we should be here in this chamber. For the last six weeks—and I am a fairly good attender in this chamber; I am either here in my seat or behind the curtains, and can generally be found—on the defence committee alone, with 23 other hon. members of this house. I have been attending twice and three times a day through the five sitting days of the week. Our only opportunity to be present in this chamber has been on the orders of the day. This is not right. Just think of the speeches the house has been deprived of hearing, because we have been absent on committee work.

Mr. Baldwin: What about the benefit to the defence committee?

Mr. Churchill: The defence committee has of course reaped the benefit. But a larger audience exists in this chamber. The present system is ruinous of the work of an hon. member; it is ruinous to the chamber itself and is putting too much emphasis on the committee system. The committee system has value, but its value is not as great as some outside observers maintain. Having done quite a bit of committee work over a great number of years, I come back to the point that here in this chamber more effective work generally is preformed.

There are special times and special investigations when better work is carried out by a smaller committee, but by and large this chamber is the place where the work should be carried out. I hope that instead of having 24 committees examining estimates, the bulk of the estimates will be covered here and the ministers concerned will stand up and disclose to us whether they know anything about the departments with which they are fumbling. We will soon find out. I support what has been said by the hon. members for Kamloops and others in regard to the committee system. It has gone too far too fast, and there should be a retraction in this respect.