

Dollar Items

subjects which are of serious importance to the people, this institution and all its members will suffer in consequence.

I shall not try to attribute all the blame to the opposition. But when I see a day like this, a day which might have been devoted to subjects which are on the minds of the people, being devoted to the consideration of the propriety of \$1 items in the estimates, I find myself questioning the judgment of the opposition.

Some of us heard John Drewery on the news the other evening when he was talking about what was going on in parliament. Perhaps I might read some of the things he said at that time. John Drewery is a senior member of the press gallery and he has reported the proceedings of the House over many years. He is a man who does not engage in extremism, a man of moderation and sound judgment. He said this:

Politically related events outside Parliament Hill have been stealing the thunder of the Commons during recent months . . . René Lévesque has not dropped the other shoe on the future of confederation . . . Ministers of the Crown have been breaking tradition by announcing policies to newsmen rather than to parliament. Opposition leader Joe Clark fought and lost a partisan battle to grab a new riding from a colleague in Calgary. The popularity polls have been bouncing up and down. Meanwhile, activities of the MPs have been slipping into irrelevance.

The parliamentary dedication to trivia, in the daily question periods, in the sparsely attended debates in the Commons, in committee, has never been more intense. Exercises in political gamesmanship seem to have become more important than producing public insights on the expenditure of tax dollars. Whatever the reason, MPs may find themselves answering questions about what they have done for the country lately when the spotlight returns to the activities of the House of Commons.

In this session, after over 90 sittings, only seven bills have been passed. More than 15 days were consumed by a bill implementing policies announced more than a year earlier. The bills emanating from last year's budget were passed barely in time for this year's. The government and opposition make arrangements for the conduct of business that never seem to work. Only last week, after an agreement was reached to finish the advance payments for crops bill on Friday, suddenly, when the time came, the Official Opposition refused consent to proceed with third reading because some of their members who wanted to speak were not here. Why not? The business was announced Thursday at three o'clock. Why did they leave on Thursday when business in which they claim to be interested was scheduled for Friday? Or if they were not here on Thursday—and one may well ask why they were not—why did their House leader or whip not recall them? This is typical of the total lack of responsibility on the part of the opposition—especially the Official Opposition—toward doing the business which their constituents sent them here to do. They will not plan, they will not organize, they will not discipline themselves, and when they get one of the rare opportunities to put forward a votable motion, rather than daring to deal with a matter of substance, a matter of relevance to the people, they want to talk about \$1 items in the estimates. This is a subject which has been debated again and again in the House and with regard to which succeeding Speakers have given many rulings.

Mr. Crouse: We would like to know where you spent the money. That is what we want to find out. These \$1 items hide billions.

[Mr. Sharp.]

Mr. Sharp: Perhaps I might go on to deal with the substance of the question, though I hesitate to do so since Mr. Speaker has already been asked to rule on it. We have been over this ground on so many occasions in the past.

One thing should be kept in mind: all estimates, whether for \$1 or millions of dollars, are legislative in nature. When enacted in an Appropriation Act, an item in the estimates not only provides the amount of money, but also establishes precise purposes, terms, conditions and methods of spending the money. Under our constitution—we can find this in both the British North America Act, 1867, and in the Standing Orders of the House—such purposes, terms, etc., must be recommended by the Governor General to the House of Commons.

It is not unusual for a modern government to discover in the course of a year that, while it has had enough money voted to it, the terms of the appropriation are too narrow, or more money has been voted for one purpose and not enough for another. There are also financial actions that do not involve much more than paperwork, such as the writing off of debts or losses, the guarantee of loans or the capitalization arrangements of Crown agencies or companies. In order to meet these situations, an Appropriation Act must be amended. This is done through another Appropriation Act. All Appropriation Acts are based on estimates. Estimates must provide some sum of money. If no further expenditure is required, then rather than ask for more money than it needs, the government, for the sake of legal form, attaches the amount of \$1.

In the process of legislating the amounts, purposes, terms, etc., of expenditures, it is not unusual for parliament to find that the provisions of an act other than an Appropriation Act conflict with the proposed expenditure. For example, there are many members of both Houses of Parliament who are farmers and who, as such, benefit in a direct financial manner from programs of Canada Agriculture established by items in the estimates. The Senate and House of Commons Act, however, prohibits members of either House from receiving payments from the Crown in right of Canada except their indemnities and allowances. In order to treat farmers who are members as fairly as those who are not, such items always contain verbiage suspending the relevant provisions of the Senate and House of Commons Act. This is, in effect, an amendment to that act. One can find many other similar examples where the verbiage of an item in the estimates avoids a conflict between the objects or terms of the expenditure and the provisions of statute law. This is a logical, legitimate and effective manner of keeping laws in harmony with each other while avoiding the trivialization of parliament. The government must, of course, proceed cautiously with regard to such items and the House must examine them with care. As a former government House leader, I have had the responsibility for seeing that any items with respect to which I had doubts of this character were not brought before the House.

Ample provision is made in the standing orders for the examination of estimates, whether of the \$1 variety or not. All items are referred to standing committees where ministers and officials are interviewed about them. Any item or items may,