

Government Organization Act, 1970

final say because the estimates have to be brought to Parliament.

Mr. Drury: The Appropriation Acts.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Yes, the Appropriation Acts. I will put on all the sackcloth and ashes that I should put on in saying that I went along with most, although not all, of the changes that we made to our rules of procedure during the last two or three years. Some of them I went along with enthusiastically, some I went along with reluctantly—but I went along with them. One of the changes that I went along with was the elimination of committee of supply and the institution of this new regime for handling estimates. May I be permitted to make the defensive statement that I think that most of the changes we made were good, particularly the way we now handle legislation. I think we improved our treatment of legislation tremendously. I think the committee system, as far as committees handling legislation is concerned, is also a great improvement over the former system. But as far as the handling of money is concerned, Parliament now has no control over the government's spending power.

When the House debates appropriations, we find that at a quarter to ten in the evening of a fixed day Mr. Speaker stops the debate and we then take a few votes. Unless some of us have put down motions to take votes on particular items, we just take the one vote. Technically, the President of the Treasury Board is correct; it is Parliament that votes the money. But this system has become just about the supreme farce of this institution. I am not saying that we should go back to the old committee of supply system, because that had become pretty farcical too. But we have not yet solved the problem and it is a problem that we must solve in terms of procedure.

I had the privilege, as did other hon. members, of talking to some of the new interns at the beginning of this session, and I threw out to them a challenge. I tried to tell them what we had done and then I said, "I hope that in the time that you are here you can come up with the answer to the problem of parliamentary control over finance". That is my answer to the point made by the President of the Treasury Board that Parliament does have control because we vote on appropriations bills. I suggest that does not mean a thing.

The fact is that once we have passed this bill, the whole business of structuring government, the kind of departments we have and the authority that is given to them will become a matter of proclamation. I am not referring to just the first proclamation that appoints ministers of state of this, that or the other, but to the several proclamations in respect of various duties. No president has the power the Prime Minister will have. He will sit over there, or in his office, and run the whole show.

I do not want to detract for one moment from the good fun we have had in this debate, particularly this afternoon. The bill is being condemned because it will create all these new positions for the boys, with additional salaries for parliamentary secretaries, additional salaries

for ministers of state, and so on. There has been some good fun in that regard. But I also think there is some seriousness to it. I do not want to name him, but I have had letters from an outstanding political scientist in this country who is wondering whether we are not shooting right through the whole independence of Parliament principle by putting so many people on the government payroll.

As I say, I think this criticism of additional appointments has been serious. But I am a little afraid that with all the attention we have paid to this particular question, and with all the natural defences that are raised by members on the other side, we are rather obscuring the main point; we are missing what is mainly wrong with this bill. The thing that is mainly wrong with it is that it divorces the government, the executive, still further from parliamentary control. I suppose one would have to admit that this has been going on down through the years. I have not the time, even if I wanted to take it, to cite some of the things I have seen over the years, but I have seen far too much of this sort of thing since the present Prime Minister came to power.

Some hon. members on the other side may think it is a minor point that ministers no longer have to be in the House five days a week to answer questions, as used to be the case. This was not brought about by a change in the rules. It was not done by consent of the House or by direction from the Chair. It was not done by statute. This was done on the fiat of the Prime Minister, who told his ministers, "Two days a week you do not need to be in the House at all. You are on the roster for three days, and if you are absent, then that is just too bad for the House". We have become used to this proposition, but it is an instance of removing government from the control of Parliament. I have already mentioned our treatment of the estimates. Perhaps we are all to blame; we participated in the changing of the rules. But perhaps we will have to make more changes, because the way the matter stands at present we just do not control the purse-strings at all. Parliament is presented with a fait accompli. True, we can vote yes or no; but with a government majority the vote is always yes, and that is it. We are now presented with a great big appropriations bill that has everything in it from the salaries of our page boys to the huge expenses of the Department of National Defence. All this is in the one item, the good with the bad. How can we vote against the main appropriations bill? The government has extended this principle until, as I say, we no longer have parliamentary control over spending.

There is also the growing practice of introducing omnibus bills. This is demonstrated by the present bill. I hope Your Honour does not mind if I join with others in recalling your phrase about your own raised eyebrows when you saw the bill. The bill has nine different parts and covers a myriad subjects. Not only does it include many items which will make it difficult to know how to vote, but in addition to all the provisions of the bill there are two schedules. A number of items contained in schedule B, in particular, are in themselves little bills that amend statutes here, there and all over the place.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]