

right of parliament through its committees to hold government departments and public servants accountable for expenditures of public funds.

Why then do we depart from the procedure that has been followed in connection with the estimates of the Privy Council office and the Prime Minister's office? It is because of the growth in size and power of the office of the Prime Minister since the present incumbent was sworn into office.

The Prime Minister has talked about a presidential system. I submit that we are being denied the right, in the context of a new rule of the Prime Minister's office and the office of the Clerk of the Privy Council, to examine the spending estimates of what is in fact now a fully fledged department of government. In being so denied, the government has set up, ipso facto, parallel power. We have arrived in fact at almost the point where we have a presidential system in this country.

We have seen the role of Cabinet ministers being diminished concomitant with the increase in the power of the office of the Prime Minister and the office of the Clerk of the Privy Council. At the same time we now have growth, in importance and in frequency, of the federal-provincial conferences of ministers—meetings of first ministers. All of these things erode parliament and the power of parliament to hold the government accountable. The government denies us the right to examine in committee the estimates of this new department of government, which was so described by the former Clerk of the Privy Council when he said, or referred to it as a department which provides its minister with analyses, advice and recommendations on the objectives of the department. So the Privy Council does give the Prime Minister information, analyses and advice on the totality of policy, and it has clearly emerged as a department of government.

● (1740)

That brings us to the question of why we are following this procedure today. Before the Miscellaneous Estimates Committee of this House, we were denied the right to examine the Clerk of the Privy Council. We were denied the right to examine a man who is in effect, deputy minister of a department. We have the evidence of the President of the Privy Council who appeared before the committee and admitted that he had no administrative responsibility for these estimates. So we have taken the only route open to us, that of taking an opposition day for the purpose of bringing these estimates to the House and for the purpose of giving some credence to the argument put forward by the President of the Privy Council that, to say the least, it is unusual for a Prime Minister to be called before a parliamentary committee. So we arranged to have his estimates brought before the Committee of the Whole House.

In doing so we did it on the understanding that the Prime Minister would be in the House not only to explain the substantial increase in his spending estimates, and not only to explain the change in the role of the office of the Prime Minister and the office of the Privy Council but also to answer questions in relation thereto.

What happened? We had the Prime Minister here for less than two hours. A good part of that time, an hour and

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25 minutes, was taken up by the Prime Minister himself even though there was a clear understanding that we would be operating under the same procedure that applied to the estimates of the Department of Transport which were before the House last week. That was the understanding to which we agreed. As my leader said, we allowed the Prime Minister to lead off because the estimates are his and it is only right that he should defend his estimates, and also in recognition of the importance of the office of the Prime Minister, not realizing for a moment that he would come before the House, use up his time, and take off for parts unknown.

The Prime Minister should have been in the House for the continuation of this debate. He could have delegated the President of the Privy Council to represent him wherever it is he must be tonight, or he could have delegated the parliamentary secretary to the President of the Privy Council, because there is nothing as important as the function of this parliament in that every minister, whether or not it be the Prime Minister, must be accountable to parliament for the spending of estimates.

It is rather interesting that one can trace the growth in the expenditures and power of the office of the Prime Minister to the new rules adopted by the House when parliament in 1968 gave up the right to withhold supply, when we gave up committee of supply and our traditional rights under the British parliamentary practice. At that moment we lost control of the public purse, and at that moment we had the growth begin in the size and expenditures of the Prime Minister's office and the office of the Privy Council.

Then following that we had the regional desks. What happened to them? We know what happened to the roster system whereby ministers were denied the opportunity to go to the House daily to be accountable during the question period. We also had the economic advisory committee or the finance advisory committee that was set up with ultimate and parallel power to that of the Department of Finance. All these things concern us. This is the reason why we wanted to have the Prime Minister in the House today.

We do not want to talk about chandeliers and ash trays but rather the real gut issue, which is the fact that the Prime Minister and his office now wield power while accountable to no one. Under the present system the Prime Minister has power and authority and is accountable to no one. Clearly we have the emergence in Canada of a separation of the executive from the parliamentary system. We now have the Prime Minister's office wielding power at federal-provincial conferences. We have the emergence of the federal-provincial secretariat. Hardly a month goes by when there is not a federal-provincial conference of some kind, and of course we have the annual conferences of first ministers. All of this is in keeping with the emergence of the Prime Minister's office and the fact that the office is no longer accountable to parliament.

Mr. Reid: No longer?

Mr. McGrath: No longer accountable to parliament. Perhaps the parliamentary secretary will explain why the Prime Minister is not in the House today to answer questions on his estimates?