

The Address—Mr. Sharp

of the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs, all of which will contribute positively to our deliberations.

To strengthen parliament's role as a vehicle of reasoned dissent when no institution, human or divine, is immune to critical scrutiny is surely the purpose to which we should be addressing our endeavours. It is important in this connection, it seems to me—and I hope I will have general agreement in the House—that steps be taken to increase parliament's accessibility and the ordinary Canadian's sense of participation. All Canadians are affected by decisions we take here, on the floor, and in the standing committees. The high court of parliament must in turn reflect the concerns and anxieties of those it represents in a tangible and visible way.

First, let me deal with the matter of the granting of supply, one of the primary functions of parliament. The 1968 reforms transferred the essential scrutinizing function of the committee of supply to standing committees of the House. Some, like the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker), have felt that the present procedure does not permit the intensive and detailed scrutiny of major estimates which is parliament's right. Referral of estimates to appropriate standing committees has relieved the House of a great deal of the burden of routine scrutiny, while the principle of redress of grievances has been preserved and indeed amplified in the allocation of 25 days every year to the opposition parties. Nevertheless, it is important that the two great principles of control of expenditure and redress of grievances not only be imbedded in the system but that they be visibly a part of it.

I should emphasize that I do not think there should be any question at this time of returning to the old committee of supply procedure; the present procedure on the whole is superior. On the other hand, there may be occasions when particular estimates could be scrutinized in a committee of the whole House, and the government approaches the question with a flexible attitude. Indeed, within the next couple of weeks we will have an opportunity to experiment with this method of scrutinizing estimates pursuant to the special order approved at the opening of this session.

It has been said that government proposes and parliament disposes. In any parliament there are two major components, the party in power and the opposition. This produces a definite polarization in the conduct of House business—not always an ideological or even political polarization—the polarization of the “ins” and the “outs”. This is a healthy state of affairs when it leads to careful and well organized programs by the government and vigorous, positive and informed criticism by the opposition. As in all human affairs, ideal conditions do not always prevail, even in the high court of parliament.

Nevertheless, when it comes down to those critical periods when it is a case of making parliament work, both sides generally place partisan considerations temporarily to one side in the interests of the proper functioning of the institution. I anticipate no dissent when I say that this parliament will have to be made to work steadily and with concentration if we are to deal with the backlog of work before us at the beginning of this session. I am encouraged by the meetings I have already had with the House leaders of the opposition parties to believe that this is well under-

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stood by all of us as we try to arrive at a consensus on the time-frames within which government-sponsored legislation can be made to pass through the House and its standing committees.

There has been good success in the past several sessions in reaching agreement on methods and timing for dealing with legislation, and while we have not yet reached the state of organization prevailing in the mother of parliaments, the volume of important legislation in our last two parliaments is evidence that with goodwill and co-operation we are moving in the right direction. It is my view that we can go a good deal further in the organization of our business without weakening the effectiveness of the opposition in its essential function of critic and, as a by-product, raise the level of debate and give members on all sides a better opportunity of participation.

● (1430)

The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) in his speech in this debate dealt with the use of the period devoted to oral questions. This 40-minute period is a routine procedure, as some hon. members know, of comparatively recent origin. I can recall watching from the officials' gallery some years ago when oral questions were very few in number and were prefaced by the words, “Before orders of the day I would like to address an urgent question to the minister”. I can also recall sitting in the House when the opposite extreme was the case and there was no time limit: sometimes the oral question period lasted more than an hour, sometimes as much as two hours. Our procedure with respect to oral questions has evolved to conform to the nature and requirements of the Canadian House of Commons and it is without doubt the most lively period in our daily deliberations, the best show in town. This it should remain. In my view, however, it can be improved without losing its liveliness. The televising of this part of our proceedings would in itself help to discipline the questions and the answers.

Mr. Munro (Esquimalt-Saanich): Maybe we would get answers.

Mr. Sharp: The points that need most careful consideration are, first, the giving of notice of the opening questions to be put to the ministry and, second, the attendance of ministers. As a minister, I confess that I rather like the challenge of trying to answer questions without notice.

Mr. Munro (Esquimalt-Saanich): Or evade them.

Mr. Sharp: I also know that if I receive notice I must give better answers, and the supplementaries could provide the stimulus of the unexpected. Neither will the oral question period suffer in liveliness or in value if some sort of system is introduced that would not require all the ministers to be in the House every day so that each of them is present in case somebody, without notice, happens to address a question to them. I am not suggesting that we will revive the roster system, or anything like that. What I am saying, Mr. Speaker, is that this is a question for consideration, in the interest of the opposition. They can contribute to improving their own performance in the House by giving the ministers an opportunity—

An hon. Member: Gee whizz; thank you.