

Government Orders

making this institution work more effectively for the people of Canada.

• (1620)

Let me call his attention to a very particular aspect of the committee work. First of all, as I understand the proposed changes to the Standing Orders, the effect would be that the various committees would go into what are called envelopes. Only two committees within the envelope can meet at the same time. If one of the committees is meeting virtually around the clock, this will put great limits on the time available for the other committees to meet.

The reform of the committee structure in Parliament before I got here back in 1984 was intended, as I understand it, to permit even closer scrutiny to the workings of the various departments than had been possible before the rule changes of 1984 went into effect. However, it strikes me that the rule changes proposed here will even further restrict the committees from doing the job that they were earlier intended to do.

The effect of the rule changes in 1984, before the current rule changes come into play, is as I see it, to really hobble Parliament in the role that it may have in scrutinizing expenditures.

Our committee is responsible for reviewing the expenditures of the Department of National Defence, \$12.5 billion a year, billions of dollars on expenditures for military equipment which as far as I can see, given the end of the Cold War, are obsolete. Yet our committee has virtually no time, even under the present structure, to review these billions of dollars worth of expenditures. We have had one meeting at which the Minister of National Defence came to address the question of estimates.

As the spokesperson for our party, I had 10 minutes worth of questions, and that included the time given to the answers. We have a good chairman. He was ready to try to find extra time for us, but the minister's availability ran out.

We have very limited time to do that function. We also have limited time to study general policy. In particular, I would like him to address how these rule changes are going to make it possible for the committees to do the job they have to do. Surely, the direction of these changes should have been to expand the capacity of the committees, rather than restrict them.

Mr. Malone: Mr. Speaker, my first comment to the hon. member—I anticipate that there will be some laughter when I say this—is that we do not live in a perfect world.

Having said that obvious fact, the truth of the matter is that we are not going to be able to do everything that we think ought to be done in every condition in all situations and at all times.

The hon. member for Victoria states that this is going to restrict the committee's capacity and then he said: "as was the case the last time that the rule changes were there". Maybe the hon. member is as mistaken this time as he was with respect to the last time.

I was here before the present rules changes came in. We could not study anything in any committee unless the minister mandated us to do it. If it was controversial, we simply could not get a mandate.

What happened with the rule changes out of the McGrath committee is that now committees on their own discover and develop their own subject area. That is what they researched. That is what they put forward.

When the hon. member says that this is going to restrict us like the last changes restricted us, first of all we need to bear in mind that he might just as well be wrong about this one as he was the one before, because it is a lot better now than it was in that first situation.

When my good friend from Victoria says that \$12 billion of expense money is obsolete spending now that there is peace in the Middle East, he is absolutely right. As long as he can guarantee me that there will never again anywhere ever in the world be another agitation of one nation against another, then spending on military defence is obsolete. I want a greater guarantee than somebody's word that somehow that expenditure is obsolete. The Kuwaitis sure do not believe that it is obsolete. We had the capacity within the world to give them back their nation after they were intruded upon by a dictator. I would submit that the obsolescence that he would attach to the federal expenditures for national defence are only accurate if there never again was to be a provocation by any nation against another.

He talks about the importance that he attaches to the estimates. He may very well attach importance to the estimates. Many members do. The hon. member is saying that I do not. Now I have not said I do not. He is saying that. That is the old thing I asked him not to do a