

*Supplementary Estimates (A)*

without any chance to debate them on the floor of the House, a process many of us do not like, that has been there since we put these rules in a decade ago, and the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton is quite right that I am not happy with that arrangement. It is the one thing out of the changes we made that I think does not stand up, and that we should be changing. By the same token, I am prepared to experiment with something else in the meantime.

● (1740)

As for the proposal by the President of the Privy Council, it provided the same number of days for what remains of 1980, and it provided for the same number of "non-confidence" days. He also provided for the estimates to be out there in committee a lot longer than the rules provide. So I do not think he deserves to be castigated quite as much as he has been today. All he was doing was trying to put together the rules as we have them in terms of the 1980 time frame. I appreciate the fact that he added these extra weeks or months for discussion in committee, but as the hon. member for St. John's West indicated, many of us have become dissatisfied with that arrangement.

Now, what the hon. member for St. John's West, as the spokesman for the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton, is proposing, is that in 1980 we experiment, as we have done in some other years, with having a few days of estimates here on the floor of the House. The proposal, as I get it, in this amendment, is that with respect to interim supply and supplementary estimates we have four days debate, the four days being May, 12, 13, 14 and 15. Right away that hits the President of the Privy Council between the eyes. Where does he find four days? Let me come to that in a moment.

Then the member for St. John's West proposes that when we get to December and we come to wind up the main estimates, there be an opportunity for debating the estimates of three departments, which the opposition will choose, but without any time limit on the total number of days to be taken for that debate. I read the amendment as saying that debates will all take place in Committee of the Whole. That is good. In other words we do not have set speeches with the Speaker in the chair; we spend all our time in Committee of the Whole questioning ministers on those estimates. I do not think the wording of the amendment changes the time limit on speeches. I think the 20 minute rule still applies in Committee of the Whole. But there is no limit on the number of days that might be taken on those departments.

So what the member for St. John's West is asking is that, in addition to what is provided in the rules, translated as the President of the Privy Council has done, there be an additional four days in May for supplementary estimates and interim supply, and an additional unstated number of days in December for debating three departments. Now I would like to make the suggestion that some time soon, perhaps after I have finished speaking, this debate might even be adjourned, and we could possibly go on to something else. The House leaders might get together, in short, to consider what might be done.

First, may I talk about the four days in May? We could trade off some of the opposition days for some of the four days. I will not start off by saying we will give you four for four, but we might give you two for four. I am suggesting that the problem that the minister has of finding four days' debate in that period could be looked at in terms of a trade-off with opposition days. The same could happen in December; there could be a trade-off. I recognize that it will be a strange government if it agrees to an unlimited debate on those three departments, but if we got together the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton might say: "All right, we will accept a certain time limit; we will accept four days in December on that special supply bill that deals with three departments and be prepared to give up two opposition days." This is the kind of thing we do in House leaders' meetings all the time.

I think that if we had had this before us at one of our meetings in the last week or so we might have come to it. So I find myself in this position in those meetings, often trying to be an honest broker between my two friends. They have both been in and out of government, and they both have feelings about this, and each one is trying to get back at the other and all that sort of thing. I have not been in that position, so I can try to conciliate between the two of them.

I say I do not think the President of the Privy Council should be condemned for his motion. He did not put anything new into that motion at all. It is already there that the estimates go off to committee and when they come back there is no debate on them unless the opposition puts some of them down for an opposition day. He has given more time, but that is simply because of the nature of the calendar in 1980. So I do not think he should be condemned. Neither do I think the proposal of the hon. member for St. John's West should be dismissed out of hand because his proposal seems to call for four more days of debate in the House in May and an unlimited number of days of debate in December. I think the compromise is to have four or three days in May and a bit of a trade-off with the opposition days. The other thought is to have an understanding about a certain limited number of days in December, again with a trade-off against opposition days.

As for the idea itself that we should bring back some of the estimates to the floor, I have been speaking in favour of this for years. Then, as to the other proposition that debating estimates on the floor of the House should be only at the Committee of the Whole stage—I do not think I have seen it in those precise words before—it is a good idea and I commend the author of it.

Way back in ancient history we used to debate the estimates entirely on the floor of the House in committee of supply. The process went on and on, but there were some pretty good debates. The hon. member for Nepean-Carleton will remember them because he sat up in the gallery as a boy and watched them. Some of us were down here on the floor. But, you know, this country got too big, the number of departments became too many, the sums of money became too involved, and we just could not handle it that way—the year was not long enough for us to consider all the estimates in committee of supply on