

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Friday, March 3, 1967

The house met at 11 a.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. CHURCHILL—CONDUCT OF CHAIRMAN OF
DEFENCE COMMITTEE

Hon. Gordon Churchill (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a question of privilege which affects the rights and privileges of every member of the House of Commons, and particularly affects the conduct of standing and special committees of the house. The normal procedure with regard to these committees, according to my understanding, is that they are masters of their own arrangements concerning the number of meetings and the times at which these meetings may be held. Normally these arrangements are arrived at by unanimous consent or by consultation in the steering committee and, infrequently, by a motion which is debated and settled by the committee as a whole. The latter method is rarely used.

The chairman of a standing or special committee, according to my understanding, has no rights or authority greater than those enjoyed by the chairman of the committee of the whole house, and certainly not equal to those of Mr. Speaker. My understanding has always been that committees are conducted according to the rules of the House of Commons as they are applicable; that the rules of debate apply in committees as they do in the house, as do similarly the rules pertaining to motions and amendments.

● (11:10 a.m.)

I am drawing your attention, sir—and I think we will have to get this settled—to what I term absolutely autocratic action on the part of the chairman of the defence committee this morning at eleven o'clock. At eleven o'clock this morning the chairman made this statement which I copied down, and which I reaffirm because he repeated it. His statement was "We will meet this afternoon at 3.30".

We received notice of a meeting of the committee for 9.30 this morning which we observed, and that meeting was held. We received no notice of a meeting at 3.30 this afternoon. In the committee at eleven o'clock

no motion that we should meet this afternoon at 3.30 was put forward or received.

Mr. Harkness: At two o'clock.

Mr. Churchill: Was it at two o'clock?

Mr. Starr: That is even worse.

Mr. Churchill: Yes, it is even worse. I will change that statement to read two o'clock instead of 3.30, which is an even more arbitrary decision than I imagined it to be. As I say, no motion came before the committee and there was no opportunity for discussion. I simply raised this point with the chairman and I jotted down his words and asked whether he was arbitrarily making that ruling.

If this is permitted to become an established practice, Mr. Speaker, every committee chairman will set himself up with greater authority than you yourself enjoy—because you operate within the rules—and will determine on his own authority and at his own wish when, and I suppose where, meetings may be held. There is nothing to prevent the autocratic chairman of the defence committee from calling a meeting for tomorrow, or for Sunday, or for tonight, or for 3 a.m. tomorrow morning. This is how far the matter has gone. Unless some restraint can be placed upon this committee chairman—and I hope this restraint will then be observed and followed by other committee chairmen—we as members of this house will have our rights and privileges taken away from us. It is a shocking state of affairs, sir, that a standing committee of the House of Commons should be conducted in this arbitrary fashion, as a result of which hon. members are prevented from carrying out their duties effectively.

There is no excuse for this type of arbitrary action, sir, because this committee has been meeting every day of each week now for four weeks, sometimes twice a day and sometimes three times a day, for a total of 39 meetings. It is doing effective work of the greatest national importance. Yet here are its members being subjected to arbitrary action, sir, action which you yourself would never countenance and have never attempted to take in the House of Commons, because you operate within the rules.