

Supply

Most are women and more than one million are children.

In 1984 when this government came to power the debt was a little less than \$168 billion. The government said it was going to control the deficit and the debt. At the time the deficit was over \$30 billion. Since then, there has been a deficit every year, with one exception I believe, but even then there were some doubts, because it went over \$30 billion. The debt which was nearly \$168 billion now stands at \$468 billion. Obviously their policies are not working.

We must not forget that when the government talks about expenditure control it never says it transferred its expenditures to the provinces, which have done the same to the municipalities, universities, colleges and hospitals. So this is not a responsible approach.

• (1855)

It seems my time is running out. That is too bad because there is a lot more I wanted to say. Mr. Speaker, I am sure you will agree it is high time we had an election, elected a new government and tried new policies that provide an innovative response to the real problems of Canadians. What are those real problems? Well, the first one is job creation, to give some hope to Canadians who feel utterly lost and think the country is out of control and the government is not working, or working very badly. I am now ready for questions.

[*English*]

I thank you and I am now willing to entertain questions.

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg Transcona): Mr. Speaker, I would start with a few remarks about the nature of supply. Supply is an ancient and honourable term for the procedure by which the government is supplied with money in order to carry out its programs and do the things governments do.

This is the last day for the main estimates but I think it is also an opportunity to reflect on how insignificant the whole issue of supply has become in the House of Commons. At one time that was one of the main functions of the House of Commons and of course in theory it still is. It goes all the way back to the Magna Carta when the king could not raise taxes or spend money without the permission of Parliament.

Up until 1969, and it still exists in some legislatures in Canada, the government had to bring all its estimates before the entire House of Commons. If the opposition was in the mood it could make cabinet ministers answer questions down to the last detail of their expenditures. Members of Parliament were able to find out a great deal of detail and were also able to put a considerable degree of pressure on cabinet ministers. It was a time when members of Parliament were able to get certain things done for their constituents in return for speedy passage of estimates or whatever.

That practice ceased to exist in 1969 when the Liberal government of the day imposed a series of reforms unilaterally and not by consensus. One of those reforms was that the estimates would be considered by committee. When I first came here that was still a reasonably lively element of what went on around here although it certainly had its limitations. In the spring ministers would appear before committees to answer for their estimates and of course it would be a time when they would also have to answer for any other matters that came within their jurisdiction.

The press used to attend these meetings and it was an opportunity to see an exchange between the opposition members or for that matter government backbenchers and cabinet ministers about government policy and expenditures. Then of course the estimates were deemed to be passed by a certain date in any event.

To a great extent this has fallen out of favour and practice. Even when it was being practised more routinely than it is now the ministers always knew they had to put up with the meetings. They knew there was no chance the estimates were not going to be approved. They knew the committee could not really change the estimates. So it was just a matter of killing time until the questioner used up his or her time or the minister, as was often the case, used up the questioner's time. I am sure the member remembers when the minister would just take up time with the questioner, the 10 minutes would expire and that would be it. The scrutiny of the estimates would be over.

• (1900)

I was the health critic for a while in the early 1980s. The budget for health and welfare was in the billions and billions of dollars and I had 10 minutes to question the Minister of National Health and Welfare on that and