

Supply—Privy Council

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Chairman, would the President of the Privy Council permit a question?

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Yes.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): In view of the suggestion the President of the Privy Council is now making, that there are matters we might discuss and consider, does he not agree that it would be better to arrive at changes that way rather than by the method of just announcing them unilaterally from the government side of the house?

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Mr. Chairman, the Prime Minister and I have conceded that this system is experimental. I think it would be advisable to continue the experiment. I will have the opportunity to discuss these matters with the house leaders of the other parties, but I think it would be useful to carry on with the experiment. If it does not work, I would be the first to suggest that it be abandoned. I say, on the other hand, that objections to the system on the very first day it was put into practice should be taken with a grain of salt, because after all we are without any practical experience of how it will work. As I say, I think we should continue the experiment.

Mr. Aiken: Mr. Chairman, I shall take only a few minutes to deal with one or two points that I believe should be emphasized. The first is the question raised by the President of the Privy Council when he concluded his remarks, namely, that objections made on the first day of the system being put into effect should be taken with a grain of salt. I think the President of the Privy Council must recognize that the government took absolutely the wrong approach to the problem in an effort to do something that should be progressive. In this case I hope the objective was to make the question period more useful to parliament. The point is that instead of doing so the result has been the opposite.

We are well aware that it is difficult for ministers always to be in the house during the question period. We all recognize that it is extremely difficult for them to do this. We also recognize that it has always been one of those things that they wish they could avoid. There are so many other things they have to do, so many questions that they perhaps are not quite up to, so many things that might be asked.

As has been pointed out, ministers also have duties overseas at times or in other

parts of the country and, although I will not go as far as the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre did, they also have to attend emergency meetings in the parliament buildings. But it has always been the practice, and as far as I know there has been nothing wrong with it, that ministers should, whenever physically possible, be in the house for the question period of 30 minutes on Wednesdays, one hour on Mondays and 40 minutes on the other days. This is not a long period. More than that, it is a prescribed period; they know exactly when it is going to take place within the minute, unless motions are made which mean that the question period is extended.

There has always been the understanding that ministers have a problem in this regard. I think the house has always been willing to recognize the problem. The house has always been willing to recognize that when a minister is out of Ottawa on government business he is certainly not available here for questions. This is the flexible way in which the question period has always been approached and I believe it has worked out satisfactorily. Of course there have been problems, but it has never been the case that ministers present in Ottawa have sat in their offices instead of being present in the house to answer questions.

• (12:50 p.m.)

The new system would work perhaps if there were a guarantee that an absent minister would be here on the day he is supposed to answer questions. Perhaps there is something in the suggestion that he may have to be away on a certain day but that he will be here the next day. I think we might even go along with that if the Prime Minister could say the absent minister would be present the next day. But the fact is that on a day the minister could be here he sits in his office upstairs, while on the day he is supposed to be here he gets a call to go somewhere else.

This week we had the strange situation of the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources sitting in the house during the question period on Monday presumably ready to answer questions—I am sure he saw me rise to put a question to him—but drifting away so he would not be caught in the house on a day when the timetable said he should not be here. But on Wednesday, when he was supposed to be here during the question period, in answer to my question the Prime Minister said the Minister of Energy, Mines and