

Interim Supply

An hon. Member: Exactly.

Mr. Pearson: It has been argued on the other side that their way is best because it would take the measure which is now before the house and either refer the bill itself to the defence committee before second reading, something which I believe is unprecedented in our parliamentary history—

Some hon. Members: No.

● (9:40 p.m.)

Mr. Pearson: It is something which can only be done by unanimous consent. That is the rule. Or else—I want to be fair to them—they have said that the subject matter of the bill should be referred to the committee before the bill receives second reading in this house.

What is proposed here, Mr. Chairman, is a radical alteration of our normal parliamentary procedure. I for one would be quite willing to consider such a course. We need not worry about radical alteration to parliamentary procedure when necessary. I for one would be willing to accept consideration of this if the subject matter of this bill had not already been given for over two years in the committee on national defence.

● (9:40 p.m.)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Pearson: Mr. Chairman, under the American system of government—and there is a good deal to be said for the congressional system of government; I think of it more than I used to think about it—through its committees Congress shapes up legislative proposals which, when they have been enacted by Congress, are then transmitted to the executive for administration.

But in our parliamentary system Her Majesty's ministers put before parliament proposals for new legislation. The two houses test and exercise those proposals in well-established ways. In the House of Commons the major steps in the legislative process are: first reading, second reading, the committee stage, report stage and, finally, third reading. Our procedure has developed in this way over the years to assure that the house focuses its attention on the proposals put forward by Her Majesty's ministers who have the constitutional obligation which nobody else has—no one else can take on this obligation except the ministers—to put these proposals forward in the House of Commons.

Perhaps, Mr. Chairman, I should say a word about what I consider to be a false assumption

on which the opposition has been basing much of its argument. I hope he will not be embarrassed if I quote him again, but the chief opposition whip said the other day:

He—

Referring to the Minister of National Defence.

—knows very well that if he gets his bill through the house on second reading, that is the end of the matter.

Again and again, Mr. Chairman, this misinterpretation of the significance of second reading has been put forward, and we have been told repeatedly that once second reading has been given the matter is then settled. That, in my view, is not correct. The debate on the motion for second reading is one of the time-tested steps by which the house decides what the principle of the law shall be, but it is not final or conclusive. It does not make inevitable or necessary the eventual enactment of a proposed bill.

By giving a bill its second reading—and the house can always refuse to give a bill second reading, including the defence bill, in which case it is dead—the house agrees that the principle of the bill is acceptable and that the proposal set forth in the bill should then be examined in detail in committee. Then we have the committee stage and then third reading, and it is on the motion for third reading that the house declares whether or not in its opinion, after examination of the facts and details in committee, a bill shall be accepted and passed.

An hon. Member: Closure.

Mr. Pearson: There is no closure about that. This is the procedure that is normally followed in these matters and which I am suggesting should be followed in connection with the bill we are talking about in this debate.

There is a very conclusive paragraph on this argument that the passage of a motion for second reading is not decisive in *Erskine May's Parliamentary Practice*, which we quote so often during discussions in the house. In the 17th edition, page 523, *May* says:

The various stages through which a bill progresses (normally but not necessarily on separate days) are intended by the practice of parliament to provide so many opportunities not only for consideration, but also for reconsideration.... Thus an entire bill may be regarded as one question which is not settled until it is passed. And hence no objection can be taken to an amendment on any particular stage on the ground that it raises again a question decided on an earlier stage.