

Constitution of Canada

believe it is a very worth-while exercise in which we are engaged. Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I agree with the hon. member for Peace River that the whole question should be studied.

The area where we have not solved the problem is with respect to estimates or the granting of money. I am not going to urge that we return to the old system under which every last estimate was dealt with in Committee of Supply. I think it became rather meaningless. That is the reason we agreed to send all estimates to the various separate standing committees. But I do not think anyone in this House can claim that in the standing committees the estimates are examined in any detail or that any parliamentary scrutiny is practised. I do not pretend to have the answer, but I would say that in our attempt to make improvements we have not gone very far with respect to the handling of estimates. Possibly the whole matter of estimates has become so huge in terms of the amounts of money that we have to deal with compared with what it was 100 years ago that we have to take a new look at this situation. Maybe we have to rely on the fact that we have a Treasury Board and a Treasury Board secretariat which does this type of scrutinizing before we ever see the estimates. Maybe we also have to rely on the fact that we have an Auditor General and his staff as well as a Public Accounts Committee to do the job afterwards and that in this whole picture there is not the need for what was thought to be necessary 100 years ago. Maybe Parliament has more important things to do. These thoughts are not put forward as anything final. Although we have succeeded in what we have done with respect to the legislative process in relation to committees, we have not solved the problem with respect to estimates and the granting of money.

There are other matters regarding committees that we should study. In my view the most serious problem that faces committees is that of time. Sometimes there is also the problem of space and other facilities. I would like to see more practice of the idea of committees sitting when the House is not in session. We did enough of this in September, some committees even earlier than that, to prove that it is worth while.

This very day the House is sitting morning, afternoon and night. I am a member of an important standing committee that is also meeting morning, afternoon and night. It just does not make sense, especially when one realizes that other meetings and obligations have to be crowded into the same day. When this is the case, committees suffer. Committees could do better work if we arranged for this kind of provision. It is not necessary to do this only by having committees meet during our summer recess. I think the idea of the House adjourning for a week every four, five or six weeks, whatever period might be worked out, so that committees can carry out their work is good.

In this general vein I agree with the position of the hon. member for Peace River that we should study the work of our committees. I think we should be encouraged by the useful steps we have taken and by the progress we have made to believe that we can go on to make it an even more effective part of the parliamentary process.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

I hope the motion now before us will be agreed to. I am not sure whether the member for Peace River said it today, but he certainly said it last Friday, that when committees want to travel they should make a case for it. There should not be a series of blank cheques to permit committees to travel any time the chairman or members of that committee get the notion. I believe all parties are agreed that we should not go high, wide and handsome in the matter of committee travel. Surely in the case of this particular committee it is something that is desirable.

I also have my question about the state of the federal-provincial conferences and whether they have been useful in the last two or three years but surely the constitution is still a major problem in this country. It is still a valid proposition that the people of this country ought to get involved in that consideration as much as possible.

● (12:20 p.m.)

Ideally, we should call a constituent assembly, but this is a complicated matter and when we would have the time for it I do not know. Is it not a step in that direction to have a committee of Parliament meet the people of this country? The committee has made a start in the travels it has undertaken already and I think it should be encouraged to continue rather than discouraged from making further trips. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that if the committee simply sat here in Ottawa and rehashed its various prejudices concerning the constitution it would be rendering no greater service than the federal-provincial conferences have done in the last two or three years. To my mind, its usefulness lies in the fact that it gets around the country and meets the people, and I believe it would be unfortunate if it were not permitted to carry through the program it has outlined. In my opinion refusal of this permission would be an act of unfairness, an act of discrimination against those parts of the country which have not yet been visited.

One of my hon. friends says the committee has made only one trip. Even so, it was an important one. It went all over Manitoba. I submit that the experience of the committee in Manitoba and the Yukon demonstrated the usefulness of journeys of this kind. Granted the importance of Manitoba, the rest of the country is important too, and in my view the committee should be encouraged to go on with its program as requested in the report it made at the end of last session. I speak today with less sense of disagreement with the hon. member for Peace River than I did last Friday, because I believe he has become more reasonable; he has softened his approach. He is that kind of a man.

Mr. Baldwin: I read my own speech. It made me a lot more reasonable.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): He is a man with whom it is a pleasure to negotiate the activities and business of this House, and having stated the feelings he has about the rules and about our committee system he will not, I hope, stand in the way of the committee being given the authority which it seeks. Certainly we do not