

That the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance be authorized to examine the expenditures set out in the Supplementary Estimates (C) for the fiscal year ending 31st March, 1985, tabled in the Senate today.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

REFORM OF THE SENATE

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, in rising to his feet for the first time today, the Leader of the Government in the Senate referred to developments since last we met. I have a series of questions on a development closer to this institution than the other important developments that have been referred to in the statement of the honourable leader. In fact, today is the first opportunity we have had for some days to garner from the government its thinking on the future and the work of the Senate. I must say for myself that I welcome the increased and substantial attention that has been paid to this vital institution in Canadian federalism.

The media have told us that the government has been considering proposals for changes to the Canadian Senate. I would like to ask the Leader of the Government whether, indeed, proposals have been considered by the government; if so, whether he himself has been involved in the preparation of these proposals and whether any decisions have been reached by the government with respect to the future work and powers or function of the Senate.

● (1430)

Hon. Duff Roblin (Leader of the Government): I expected this topic to be raised this afternoon. I have been making note of the questions that have been asked of me in the hope that if I can encourage other honourable senators to pose their queries, I can deal with many of them in one final statement that would, perhaps, be more comprehensive than answering individually the direct questions put to me now.

Hon. Royce Frith (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Perhaps we can make some of the questions more precise, in that case.

Specifically, the Leader of the Government in the Senate can take note, I imagine, of the interest of all honourable senators as to the extent of consultations with him about those proposals. We understand, of course, that the leader cannot disclose details of discussions which have taken place in cabinet. We are simply asking as to the direction of those proposals, to the extent that he knows that, and particularly his proposal. I think he should share with us his views on those proposals, whether or not he was consulted on them.

Again, even more specifically on that question, we should like to know whether the Leader of the Government in the

Senate was asked by the Prime Minister for his views on the proposal to abolish the Senate, and if so, what the leader's advice was.

Perhaps the Leader of the Government would give us an interim count on the position of the provincial premiers, since, if there is to be abolition, I assume that that will take place under section 41, which requires the unanimous consent of the provincial premiers, or under section 38, which would require the consent of seven of the provinces comprising 50 per cent of the population. I am sure all honourable senators are interested in knowing what the first response of the provincial premiers has been, because we have been advised that, indeed, the government has been telephoning the provincial premiers to ask them for their views.

One other matter has disturbed some honourable senators, and because of that they would like to know the opinion of the Leader of the Government in the Senate with respect to the comments made by the Honourable John Crosbie, the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, regarding the general uselessness of the Senate. They would like to know whether the leader shares those views, and whether he finds it at all embarrassing to sit in cabinet or in government with someone who holds those views as to the uselessness of the Senate? I suppose an irresistible corollary to that would be the uselessness of the Leader of the Government in the Senate and all other senators, for that matter.

Hon. David A. Croll: Honourable senators, there may be no truth to the press reports which I have read, but they troubled me, so I ask the Leader of the Government in the Senate what inducement the Prime Minister has offered the premiers of the provinces to get them to agree to the suggestion that they support whatever action will be taken with respect to the Senate?

Hon. George van Roggen: Honourable senators, I ask the Leader of the Government in the Senate if he would give some thought to supporting the establishment of a forum—and I realize that this could be done by means of putting a motion on the order paper—to solicit the views publicly of senators from both sides of this chamber as to the proposals being put forward to the provinces?

I ask that because I, for one—and I know that there are many other honourable senators who feel the same as I do, and have said so publicly—believe that a suspensive veto in the case of all legislation would be an important improvement insofar as the Senate is concerned and would enable us to do our job more effectively and in a more regular fashion. In other words, we are at the moment suffering from an overdose of power which we do not exercise.

I think it would be useful if an occasion were provided for such an expression of opinion so that, indeed, the government would know that it had the support of this chamber on some of the proposals it might well be putting to the provinces. We do not know what those proposals are, and I am not seeking to find out anything with respect to cabinet discussion in that connection, as the Honourable Senator Frith has just stated.