

Procedure Committee Report

Mr. Fisher: The ex-minister says I could bring all my constituents down here. I think he is aware that if members of parliament abuse such a privilege they are soon going to be exposed. The member of parliament who pushes this kind of thing too far is just asking for trouble with his own voters.

Another point I want to make relates to the whole matter of the treatment that is going to be given to reports of committees. In these recommendations there is really no indication of how committee reports will be treated. It would be a rather foolish parliamentarian who would say that everything a committee of the house recommended should be accepted by the government, but I want to get back to the point I made earlier. These reports should at least be accorded the respect of an appraisal by the government, or even a rejection. It seems to me that one of the best things that has taken place with regard to committees is the fact that the Auditor General now reports back to the public accounts committee on the progress made with regard to their recommendations over a year. This is one of the things that have made that committee much more effective, that have given it a continuity and have made its members feel it is worth while to belong to that committee.

I have only been a member of that committee at random times, but I know if hon. members who have not been on that committee could see how it operated they would realize that the committee has developed an esprit de corps, a morale, a confidence if you want, in its work that I think could apply to many other committees; and one of the reasons is the leverage, if you like, that it obtains through having the Auditor General working with it as an expert guide in a sense and also giving an annual resume of what has happened to their recommendations. It seems to me that in our appraisal of committees we can learn a great deal from that particular committee. I might mention, of course, that is the committee which has an opposition member heading it, and that may be one of the reasons for its effectiveness.

One of the other points we need to get straightened out before we get into the question of more committees is that we should not have them until we have facilities here for translation, for a complete handling of the bilingual situation. I am sick and tired, as we were the other day, of having a committee hamstrung for five or ten minutes debating whether or not we should switch to another place because translation facilities were not

available. One of the prerequisites before we get this new committee structure going is to have all kinds of facilities to handle the bilingual nature of the house, and at this particular time the government should be especially sensitive to that point.

I mentioned earlier that there is a tendency for members who are active in the house to be active in committees. Another noticeable tendency is for members from distant places to be more active in committees than members who are close to the scene, in terms of the location of their constituencies. This is my own observation. I cannot prove it, but in the past it seems that quite often our committees have depended in the main for their attendance upon members who live at a distance and do not make the same number of trips home as others who live close to Ottawa. This is a point that could be considered in terms of the dividing up of our parliamentary schedule, so that we are in committees at a certain time and the house is not sitting.

I understand some of the cabinet ministers and some of the other more senior members of the house do not like the idea of dividing up our schedule in that way. I would remind them that kind of division would be fair to all members across the country, in terms of freeing them so that no one would have any reason or excuse for not taking part in committee activities. I would also like to suggest that the time schedule recommended by the committee, that is, the ratio, has nothing sacred in it and it would be worth an experiment for a session.

When I was looking at committees a couple of years ago one of the things I found is that the senior civil servants, I think with some justice, have a sensitivity about the operation of committees that are examining departmental estimates. I wonder if hon. members remember a few years ago when the committee chaired by Art Smith was looking at the estimates of the Department of National Health and Welfare. A number of the committee members had their pet projects, which had nothing to do with scrutinizing expenditures, and what they were doing was lobbying in the committee for more spending in order to achieve their particular objectives. That may have been a worth-while procedure, but in their lobbying they were in effect presenting some biting criticisms of the officials concerned. One of the things we would have to be careful about when developing a set of rules for procedures for these estimates committees is how far we may go in our criticisms of the administration.

[Mr. Churchill.]