

Cost Overruns

that the motion did not cover something we felt should be covered. The President of the Privy Council gave us an assurance that it did, and we were satisfied. Perhaps he could now give us an assurance that there is to be no investigation into the building of the Rideau Canal, that there is to be no overlapping of the public accounts committee in the sense that this committee will investigate things on which the books are closed. The public accounts committee is there to do that and we hope that its activities in that direction will continue.

At any rate, Mr. Speaker, that is my purpose in intervening at this point. I do not want to repeat myself a dozen times just so the President of the Treasury Board can get here. Perhaps others can do that. I believe that there is reasonable sense to the amendment that has been proposed and that the President of the Privy Council should have no difficulty in accepting it. We do not need to divide the House on this. Why does the government House leader, on behalf of the government, not say that this is acceptable, or at least give an interpretation of the motion that covers it?

I see that though the President of the Treasury Board has not come back, we have gone higher and got the Prime Minister (Mr. Clark) back. Maybe this matter can be resolved without its becoming a major issue on which we have to divide the House on a Monday afternoon.

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Cape Breton Highlands-Canso): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that the Prime Minister (Mr. Clark) is in the House. I did not expect this bonus five or ten minutes ago when I planned to speak.

I want to begin with the point I would have begun with in his absence, namely, to ask where the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Stevens) is. If this were an isolated absence on the part of ministers, then I would not complain. We had a similar experience when the House was asked by the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Crombie) to establish a committee to look into the problems of the handicapped: neither the minister nor his parliamentary secretary found it possible to come into the House either to participate in the debate or to listen to the presentation made, presumably on their behalf, by the hon. member for Brandon-Souris (Mr. Dinsdale). That was the first incident when neither a minister nor a parliamentary secretary came into the House to defend the motion being put forward by the government.

I was prepared to overlook that, Mr. Speaker, but on Friday afternoon the House had to deal with a second important committee—important in the view of the government—to establish a review of the Foreign Investment Review Act. For a good portion of Friday afternoon the Minister of State for International Trade (Mr. Wilson) was not in the House. The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) complained about that. This afternoon the President of the Treasury Board has missed a certain portion of the debate.

I do not want to say anything further, except that if the Prime Minister is serious about his respect for Parliament, then he must ensure that ministers are present in the House when important motions standing in their name are moved and

[Mr. Knowles.]

defended. This is one of the fundamentals of ministerial government.

Mr. Clark: Such hypocrisy.

Mr. MacEachen: If the hon. member is suggesting to me that I look after my business and let the Prime Minister look after his business, then I want to tell him that what I am talking about is the business of the House of Commons. If the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Baker) seeks co-operation to get his measures through the House, co-operation which we wish to give, then the most elementary thing he has to do in order to secure that co-operation is have ministers present to explain and defend their motions in this House.

That is the first point, Mr. Speaker. I appeal to the Prime Minister, who has made a fetish—almost an obsession—of declaring his respect for Parliament. Since this session began we have had incident after incident where that fundamental interest has been lacking. I want to express my complaint in that respect.

The President of the Privy Council has suggested that we have some sinister motive in moving an amendment to this particular motion. I want to assure him and members of the House that the proposed amendment was an effort to put into practice the principle which the President of the Treasury Board enunciated today in question period and, I understand, later in his speech.

We examined this motion and wondered why the government proposed to establish a further special committee on cost overruns when the public accounts committee is equipped to deal with that very subject. We know that we have many committees in the House of Commons. We are adding to them with a profligacy I have never seen in this House before. We therefore wonder why we should have a further special committee when we have an existing committee which can do the very task that is to be assigned to the special committee.

That is why the question was addressed, before the debate began, to the President of the Treasury Board. I do not have to go into the argument that was advanced by the youngest member of the Privy Council in saying that the President of the Treasury Board told us this afternoon that he wanted the public accounts committee to deal mainly with history and the special committee to deal mainly with what I understood to be ongoing projects. We are not happy with that but we think it is a better situation than a total duplication.

In order to improve the situation, we proposed the amendment, not to limit the inquiry because inquiries can move apace in the public accounts committee, but at least to reduce what appears to us to be duplication. That is the sole purpose of the amendment.

• (1650)

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I appreciate very much what the opposition House leader has said. I wish to indicate to him that the inclusion of the word “ongoing” within the motion in the place