

Interim Supply

hon. member for Carleton for bringing forward his bill. I should like to see parliament exempt certain people from the situation that has confronted them, so that issues may be debated on their principles. Really, the issue is very simple. The Minister of National Revenue, who is not now in his place, talked earlier this afternoon about others who were not in their places.

• (5.50 p.m.)

Mr. Walker: On a question of privilege on behalf of the minister—

Mr. Woolliams: He is attending the Conservative convention, I know.

Mr. Walker: No. If he were, there might be a more intelligent convention taking place. But the minister had to attend a meeting in connection with the postal—

Mr. Woolliams: I did not say there was anything wrong in the fact that he is not here. I pointed out he was not in his place. If he is there, he is invisible. I am suggesting nothing disrespectful. I had hoped he would be here, but I understand he has obligations. All of us have other obligations. The fact is, he has left an impression that it was we on this side of the house who were trying to prevent the civil servants from getting their pay cheques. If hon. gentlemen opposite had done their book-keeping properly, the situation would never have developed. When they got that legal opinion about the transfer of funds from one vote to another, they would have known whether they had the money or not.

I believe the government knew all the time about this money. They should have announced the fact so that the civil servants would have been in no doubt about the receipt of their cheques. If the cheques were delayed, the responsibility lies with the government, not with the opposition. The minister says he referred the legal question of the transferability of these accounts to the Department of Justice for a decision. Well, the government has either been misleading us or it is guilty of poor book-keeping. Either ministers opposite did not have sufficient command over their departments to know whether they had this money in hand, or else it is fraud. On the other hand, perhaps the Minister of Finance was misleading us when he told the House of Commons and the country that more money was needed with which to pay these bills.

As far as this side of the house is concerned, we believe that what has happened was very

serious. It is time someone put on record what the functions of an opposition are. It was Arthur Meighen who said this; I think the following passage was quoted some time ago by the Leader of the Opposition.

If parliament is to be preserved as a living institution, His Majesty's loyal opposition must fearlessly perform its functions. When it properly discharges them the preservation of our freedom is assured. The reading of history proves that freedom always dies when criticism ends. It upholds and maintains the rights of minorities against majorities. It must be vigilant against oppression and unjust invasions by the cabinet of the rights of the people. It should supervise all expenditures and prevent over-expenditure by exposing to the light of public opinion wasteful expenditures or worse. It finds fault; it suggests amendments; it asks questions and elicits information; it arouses, educates and moulds public opinion by voice and vote.

Now, where does the real power of parliament, or the real power of the opposition, lie? It is this—

Mr. McIlraith: Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Woolliams: I am glad to see the hon. gentleman in his place. I know he will give me a fair hearing, and I know that if he were sitting where I am sitting he would be taking the attitude I am taking now. I say this because he is one of the senior members of the House of Commons and one who would, no doubt, agree with me.

The power of parliament lies in its control of the purse strings of a nation. If, during a debate of this nature, the present government or any other government can run rough shod over the opposition and find money, fraudulently or otherwise, then the supremacy of parliament ends. What becomes of the function of the opposition? Mr. Meighen set this out clearly when he said our function is to scrutinize every action of the government and watch over government expenditure.

The situation is simply this. Had the minister of defence agreed to allow the facts to be brought out before a committee so that the opposition might be armed with those facts and so that the house would be in a position to consider intelligently whether the unification of the defences of Canada was sound or not, this debate would have come to an end within a few hours.

Instead, the minister refused to let the facts come out before a committee. I have before me—

Mr. McIlraith: No, no.