

Mr. G. R. BOUCHER (Carleton): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Halton (Mr. Cleaver) has risen in the house to make it perfectly clear, so far as sittings of the war expenditures subcommittees are concerned, that each is left to its own discretion as to how it shall operate. In the past year I had the honour of being on subcommittee No. 1. True enough, the main committee did delegate to the subcommittee the power to decide whether it should or should not sit in secret. True it is also that in subcommittee No. 1, on which the hon. member for Halton was chairman, a motion was made at the very first sitting dealing with war-time expenditures in which it was asked that the sittings be in secret. And true it is that the motion was defeated.

Mr. CLEAVER: It was withdrawn.

Mr. BOUCHER: The hon. member for Halton may speak again after I have finished. Subcommittee No. 1 sat in secret throughout the whole of the session, dealing with many things which in my humble opinion did not warrant the slightest secrecy. Therefore I say to the hon. member that when dealing with the question of secrecy, in order that what occurred may be perfectly clear, and perfectly understood by hon. members, let us face the fact that it has been impossible for members who wanted public sittings in either the main committee or the subcommittees to be successful in their applications.

Hon. T. A. CRERAR (Minister of Mines and Resources): Mr. Speaker, the motion now under consideration is that the public accounts for the year ended March 31 last be referred to the public accounts committee. The hon. member for Lake Centre (Mr. Diefenbaker) was perhaps a little less than fair in the remarks he addressed to the house a short time ago. I do not think it is proper to have an impression go out to the country that the government desires to withhold the consideration of public accounts before the public accounts committee. I agree with the leader of the opposition (Mr. Graydon) that there is probably no more important duty for parliament than the consideration of public accounts. The whole origin of parliamentary government arises out of the question of the expenditure of public moneys and the manner in which those moneys should be raised. No duty resting upon parliament is more important than that of scrutinizing and investigating closely how moneys placed at the disposal of the government are spent.

Let me make it clear that there is not and never has been any reluctance on the part

[Mr. J. H. Harris.]

of the government to have the public accounts fully investigated and scrutinized by the public accounts committee.

Mr. DOUGLAS (Weyburn): The public accounts committee has not sat since the war started.

Mr. CRERAR: But if this motion passes, the accounts will come before the public accounts committee. In past years there seems to have been an impression that the government failed in its duty because public accounts were not scrutinized by the public accounts committee. Well, the public accounts are the record of the manner in which various government departments have spent moneys voted by parliament to the government for the purpose of carrying on the business of the country. As to the propriety of the expenditure of a single dollar in past years, it was open to any member of parliament, and it was particularly the responsibility and duty of the opposition, to have such an inquiry made.

Mr. DOUGLAS (Weyburn): That is what we have been trying to do to-day, and the minister sees how successful we are.

Mr. CRERAR: Oh, no. If my hon. friend will be patient I shall come to that in a moment. So much for that. Perhaps I should not discuss the motion of the hon. member for Weyburn since you, sir, have ruled it out of order, but I would point out that it had to do with public accounts that have not yet been considered by the auditor general and consequently are not in a position to be referred to the public accounts committee. The other point which he made, and which was made a great deal of by the hon. member for Lake Centre (Mr. Diefenbaker)—the hon. member has considerable skill in presenting a case of that kind and leaving impressions that are probably not wholly warranted—was in respect of the duties discharged by Mr. Thompson as director of government office economies control. The Prime Minister stated in his remarks that it was open to any member of the public accounts committee to ask that Mr. Thompson or anyone else come before the committee. The Prime Minister also stated that if the public accounts committee wants to investigate these allegations, if they may be termed such, of Mr. Thompson which have appeared in the newspapers, it can be done.

Mr. DOUGLAS (Weyburn): May I ask the minister how it can be done when the terms of reference are limited to discussing public accounts up to March 31, 1942?