

House of Commons Procedures

from the Minister in the course of which he gave me a great deal of information, very useful information indeed. Then he suggested, in a sense, that since I had got the information I wanted it was hardly necessary for me to ask the question. Of course, I was embarrassed. I had obtained the information that I wanted, it was true. But I also wished to bring the question to the attention of the House and, as a consequence, to the wire services and so on.

I see the Chairman holding up his finger as an admonition to me. All I can say is that the suggestion which the Minister made a few minutes ago should be taken up by whichever group considers this question. I certainly hope that should we get a committee to review the question process, backbenchers from both sides of the House will be well represented on it.

I sometimes think that Ministers and others who have been here for many years have lost sight of the urgency which prompts backbenchers or younger Members when they ask questions. Another point I wish to make in connection with Mr. Speaker and the recognition he gives to Members is this: The Chair recognizes seniority in the House during the question period in two ways, it seems to me. One type of recognition is recognition in terms of priority, and I have no quarrel with this. The assumption is that the Leader of the Official Opposition, as an official of the House, is entitled to catch the Speaker's eye first. The pattern seems to continue from there and, as I say, I am not quarrelling with that.

But there is a tendency for Speakers to recognize seniority in another and less desirable way, that is, by allowing a latitude to senior Members of the House which is not allowed to others. This applies both to the questions they ask and to the arguments they introduce. Backbenchers, particularly the newer ones, are not allowed this latitude. When it comes to an abuse of the form and the type of question, the Speaker must in all fairness be as severe in dealing with the most senior Members of this House as he is in regard to the most junior Members.

Mr. Lambert: Do they include the hon. Member for Kootenay West?

Mr. Fisher: I do not consider that the hon. Member of the Conservative Party who made that interjection is one of those in the Opposition who abuses the form of questions and turns them into argument. But he has been here long enough and he has been con-

stant enough in his attendance to know that in all Opposition groups there are Members who get away with arguments and debate and nastiness, if I may use that term, during the question period, though the same latitude is not allowed to more junior Members. On the particular question of fairness and equity I suggest that what is fair for a junior Member of the House or one far back in the rows is also fair and should be applied to the senior Members of the House. I cannot leave this point without mentioning the fact that seniority is not recognized in the question period in so far as the Government and its Ministers are concerned, but there is a parallel in the abuse with regard to questions put and answers given that is just as serious.

• (9:30 p.m.)

Here again I make the point that much of the argument, much of the illegality, if you want, of questions is occasioned by the kind of answers given. Usually you get what tends toward a debate, particularly with supplementaries when you get smart-Aleck or terribly evasive answers, or answers that are completely designed either for a laugh or, in a sense, to throw a punch back. There is no dividing or appraising of guilt in this regard, but again it is a question for the Speaker to decide and the Speaker to control.

I cannot think of a better way in this particular Parliament to restore to the question period that kind of edge that the hon. Member for Royal and the hon. Member for Winnipeg North, my colleague, were talking about than to call to order some Ministers and some senior Members of the Opposition when they do put questions which they extend with argument beyond what is permitted to other Members of the House. In other words, I think what is fair for some Members of the House should be fair to all other Members of the House.

There is one other point I want to make in connection with the question period. It has been made before and it relates to ministerial answers. Members will be able to hark back to a number of occasions when really exciting questions have been brewing in the House and its environs. I can think of two in particular. I think of the time when the whole question of Rivard and the Dorion inquiry was in embryo or developing. I also think back to the time that the Minister of Finance was having difficulties immediately after his first budget. As hon. Members will recall, the question period was very important in developing the issue, the conflict