

Business of Supply

Reedy points out that there are difficulties in establishing any institutional set of information arrangements around a president. These arrangements have a tendency to become themselves clogged channels, and hold the president off from the necessary range of information that he needs to come to effective decision making in relation to the problems that are before him. There is a danger, in other words, given the pressures of time and the pressure of detail—there is a danger of isolating the executive office from the political context.

Fortunately in a parliamentary system we have arranged methods of communication which side step that difficulty—which avoid a political isolation of decision making. They are relatively simple but they are extraordinarily important to the operation of a parliamentary system. The first is one which the hon. member for Rocky Mountain touched upon, and that is the question period.

Unlike an American president, the Canadian Prime Minister every day in parliament comes down to the House to listen to questions, to answer questions, to be here for an hour to respond to points which are made, without notice, by members of the opposition. Even if he wanted to it would be impossible for him to insulate himself from the currents of opinion, welcome or unwelcome, which are presented to him in the Commons.

Secondly, he has each day of each week—

Mr. Lefebvre: It would not be so bad if they were at least good questions.

Mr. Roberts: Well, it is very difficult to get good questions from the opposition, but I think we should be charitable and admit that once in a while they come up with one.

The opportunity is there—and the impossibility of insulating himself from public opinion, and the impossibility of insulating himself from contact with the opposition arguments, force a Prime Minister, unlike the presidential system, to come down and open himself to the attack of the opposition on the floor of the House every day that parliament is sitting.

The second device we have, which is very important to a parliamentary system, is that of the caucus meeting. Every week, once a week, for between two and three hours the Prime Minister must open himself up to the confidential but very effective scrutiny, comments, criticism, advice and exhortations of party members. He is plunged into the middle of a team process, a political team process which makes him necessarily sensitive to the currents of opinion in the country.

An hon. Member: That would be alright if you had a good team.

Mr. Roberts: Well, the Canadian electorate at the last election decided we had a much better team than that team which sits over there.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Roberts: The third aspect, which is of enormous importance, is the very institution of Cabinet government. It says that the Prime Minister cannot rely simply upon those throughout the nation he would wish to appoint to be his servants as the executive. He allies himself with a

[Mr. Roberts.]

group of politicians, with their interests, with their careers, and with their political sensitivity. He is the leader, the first minister of the party, but he is not a dictator in Cabinet. He operates basically in a consensus forum, and he must carry with him that group of politicians with whom he is associated.

It is simply not possible for a Canadian Prime Minister to isolate himself from the currents of political opinion, as so unfortunately has been seen to have happened in the United States under the presidential system.

I would argue that the growth of the Prime Ministerial office and the Privy Council office, to which members of the opposition have objected, is not in conflict with the responsibilities of the Prime Minister in the House of Commons, but indeed enhances the latter. For the blunt fact of the matter is that one man, a Prime Minister, or even a group of men in Cabinet, are not going to be able to control sufficiently a mass of civil servants with the complexity of the problems with which Cabinet must deal, and in the detail with which those civil servants must deal with them, unless they have advisory help.

It is the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, not civil servants, who must come down to the House of Commons and persuade members in the House. They count upon the support of the House of Commons, but in turn they are the agents of the House of Commons, agents who control civil servants.

You can, if you wish, deprive them of staff and support, deprive them of the people who give them assistance, and deprive them of the advisory expertise and knowledge they require to dominate the civil service and make sure the civil service follows political direction. What you will have done is not increase the responsibility of the government to the opposition, what you will have done is create irresponsible government. It will be irresponsible because you will have placed civil servants beyond the effective control of the Cabinet and, therefore, beyond the effective control of the House of Commons itself.

If you really believe in the responsibility of government and administration to political leadership, and if you believe in the responsibility of the Cabinet and the Prime Minister to the House of Commons, and thus to the people, then give the Prime Minister and give the Cabinet the kind of staff they need to make that responsibility effective in dealing with the civil service structure. If you deprive them of staff, assistance, and the expertise they need, you will cut them off at the knees; you will indeed make them weaker in dealing with the administration of the government, but you will not have enhanced the power of the House of Commons to control the destiny of this country.

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Chairman, the President of the Privy Council in a reply to the hon. member for Rocky Mountain tried to make a case for the fact that his presence here today in connection with the passage of these estimates is merely following the accepted practice of the House. He raised the question as to why this matter is even now being raised as an issue.

It is an issue because the question involves accountability, as put forward by the Leader of the Opposition, and the