

Transport and Communications

Mr. Speaker: If it is the wish of the House that I call it one o'clock, I shall do so. I had been hoping, of course, that we might have ended consideration of the procedural point by then. I did indicate to the House that it was my intention to study all the arguments submitted to me, and take the matter under advisement so that the House will have an opportunity to resume debate on the subject which is scheduled for consideration today under government orders.

However, I assume this can be done some time early this afternoon after we have heard from the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre or from any other hon. members who may wish to contribute to this interesting debate. When we have completed the procedural debate, I suggest the matter be held in abeyance and that the House revert to any business which it had agreed to consider at that time.

At one o'clock the House took recess.

AFTER RECESS

The House resumed at 2 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Order. When the House rose at one o'clock the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre had the floor.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, in connection with the point of order which we are discussing there are, two main issues. May I first refer to the second of those two main issues because I suspect that there is not much one can do by way of arguing with it. I refer to the point raised by the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council when he suggested that under Standing Order 58(16) it is required that any motion to concur in a committee report, where that report deals only with estimates, has to be made on an allotted day.

I can see problems arising when there are mixed or hybrid reports, but in so far as the third report of the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications is a report arising out of that committee's discussion of the estimates that were referred to it, I confess it would be pretty hard to argue against the requirement of Standing Order 58(16) that such a debate take place on an allotted day. In any case Your Honour has indicated, I think wisely, that you are going to reserve judgment on this point of order, so we will not debate the substance of the report today. Therefore, I will spend no more time on that issue.

I think the more fundamental issue, the first one that Your Honour raised, is the question whether or not a report such as the one that is covered by this motion is itself in order. In other words, is it permissible for a standing committee which has had estimates referred to it to do anything other than to report those estimates, either with approbation or disapproval, or by cutting them down? The report under consideration today, and several other reports on the order paper, have in them ancillary comments and recommendations which, although they arise out of matters covered in the estimates, nevertheless are on subjects not referred to the committee for comment

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

or recommendation. It is pretty hard to argue with the purist position taken by the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council, namely that the rules are strict; that is, all the committee can do is discuss what is referred to it and if all that is referred to it is the estimates that would seem to end the debate.

● (1410)

However, I think there is a good deal to say in support of the point of view put forward by the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) who reminded us that standing committees are by Standing Order given the power to discuss and examine matters referred to them. It does seem to be a matter of common sense that if they have a right to examine and discuss such matters they should be able to give the House the benefit of their opinions. I think the hon. member for Peace River stated that very well and there is no need for me to repeat it. I underline the things he said in this respect.

The only other thing I want to say—and I take the time to debate this because I think it is a point not yet made in this debate—is that it seems to me there is a parallel we should look at between what we now do in respect of bills and what we now do in respect of estimates. The Standing Orders that were adopted in 1968 changed our practice with regard to both items of business. We referred all bills, with a few minor exceptions, to standing committees. When we did that, one of the problems we faced was that this wiped out the committee of the whole operation and seemed to deny to members of the House of Commons who are not members of a particular standing committee any chance to get at the details of a bill. We protected that right by establishing the report stage. Therefore, any member of the House of Commons who is not a member of a committee to which a bill has been referred has the right to put down a motion at the report stage and secure discussion on the floor of the House of Commons on aspects of the bill about which he is concerned. I think common sense requires that we parallel that provision with one respecting estimates.

Prior to 1968, and back in years about which some of us could speak, the practice was that all the estimates were dealt with on the floor of this chamber in committee of supply. Every member was here and every member could discuss any item that came up and could discuss matters of policy and make recommendations. In other words, the points of view of members could be presented right here on the floor. Now, however, we have sent the estimates to the committees and, although there may be considerable freedom in those committees to discuss anything arising out of the estimates, that right is more or less denied to members of the House who do not belong to a particular committee.

I think we should have some device with regard to estimates that is parallel to or like unto the report stage of bills. I think the device that is readily available is that of having the right to move a motion concurring in a committee's report so that such matters can be discussed on the floor of this House. Just as in respect of the report stage of bills I accept that there must be limitations. We cannot just return to the procedure in the committee of supply and, with Mr. Speaker in the Chair, spend months and months considering estimates. But where there are par-