

Supply—Privy Council

This was of concern to my colleague the hon. member for Vancouver East, who prefaced his question by referring to the importance being attached to committees and getting them going and asked, therefore, why the organization meetings have been cancelled. I have a suspicion as to why they are being cancelled for Tuesday. Monday is a holiday and the fear is that there will not be as many members here on Tuesday morning as there would be on a normal Tuesday morning and therefore we might just as well not hold the meetings.

I mention this in the same vein as when I talked about the downgrading of the question period. We have enough trouble as it is getting members to be here. We all live in glass houses in this respect; all parties in the house have this trouble. Therefore, let no one try to throw stones, because he is in the same trouble himself.

I submit that this downgrading of the question period will add to the problem of house attendance, and I hope the government will consider my suggestion. I still feel that it was rather strange that this system should have been started the very day after we had agreed to set up a committee to study the rules and procedures of the house. The Prime Minister rose and unilaterally announced this change and we just had to take it, whether we liked it or not. Well, Mr. Chairman, we do not like it, mainly because we think it is doing damage to parliament.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Mr. Chairman, I think the intervention of the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre has been useful in this regard, as it generally is on procedural questions, because it opens up a number of avenues for further consideration of this question. Also, I think it perhaps sheds just a ray of light on the solution to the problem of the question period.

The hon. member conceded that it was entirely legitimate that I and other colleagues, who shall remain nameless, who were members of a particular cabinet committee should have been absent from the house this morning. From that concession there seems to flow a further logical principle. Given the fact that the governor general in council, that is, the executive of this country, is required by our system of government to make a very large number of decisions, many more than can be handled in one or two cabinet meetings a week outside of the ordinary business of the house, it is inevitable that there will be more than one committee

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meeting that will conflict with the sittings of the house. I think it follows equally logically that if there is this great volume of business coming forward at cabinet committee meetings, they should be scheduled so that ministers can engage in the executive work which must necessarily be performed by the cabinet. As the hon. member said, if there is legitimacy in one particular case of having such a meeting, there is legitimacy in establishing over the period of a whole week a framework of cabinet committee meetings so executive decisions can be made and the work dealt with on a regular and systematic basis.

The hon. member said that parliament as a whole will decline if the question period is downgraded. I think he may have made that remark for rhetorical effect. I believe that parliament is very much more than the question period. I am very much intrigued by his reference to the practice followed in Great Britain as a lively hour. Questions appear on the British House of Commons order paper and those requiring oral answers are called by prearrangement for the minister responsible to answer them in the house. Apparently an hour is taken up with this procedure. I think this might be a practice to be followed in our house. I believe there is merit in what the hon. member said.

I refer to one of our current rules which it seems to me has become a dead letter. I am talking about the institution of starred questions in this house. I put this suggestion forward for the consideration of hon. members opposite and perhaps we will at a later date have an opportunity to discuss it. I think it would be advisable to adapt the starred question procedure in such a way that we would have the opportunity not only of advance notice of starred questions, which come not only to the attention of the minister and the department but of all hon. members and of whoever may be watching us in the house, but also an opportunity for the minister to give a prepared reply. Then there would be further opportunities for hon. members generally, but particularly the initial questioner, to ask supplementary questions following the minister's reply. I believe this could be a very useful practice within the framework of the question period.

The hon. member said that I appeared to be trying to take one aspect of the British question period and not others. I remain very flexible in this regard. This is another aspect of the British question period that might be considered. Perhaps we will be able to consider it in the not too distant future.