

Control of Public Funds

the spending of the Canadian taxpayers' money the government was less than wise.

In the time allotted to me I would like to deal with one other subject. It is the subject of parliamentary control of the expenditures of this nation under the changed parliamentary rules which this government introduced; a change, they said, that was going to make Parliament more efficient and would give us a better opportunity to study in detail the expenditures of the government. There is no doubt in my mind that those who studied this question and proposed the rule changes meant well. In theory it looked as if the system could work, but in practice Members of Parliament soon realized that the parliamentary committee system today is not only useless but is absolutely futile in discharging the responsibility with which it is charged. I should like to give some examples, not in a partisan way but in a practical way, of what is actually going on. The hon. member for Gatineau (Mr. Clermont) spoke about the committee system. He is a member with some experience, having been a chairman. Let me say this, Mr. Speaker, that when 16 standing committees have to sit at the same time as Parliament during a session, it is absolutely impossible for any political party including the government, to man them adequately.

● (1650)

Mr. Bell: They are sitting this afternoon.

Mr. Danforth: We have 16 committees sitting this session, and last session there were 23. With the restricted number of members that we have in the House, it is impossible to man them adequately. The first thing that government members tried to do in bringing in this new committee system was to decrease the number of members necessary for a quorum. This so-called committee system is so bad right now that on a committee with 20 members, members of the government have proposed that we should have votes with only one member of the government sitting on the committee.

Mr. McGrath: Shame.

Mr. Danforth: This indicates the degree of confidence the government has in its own committee system. They said that it did not work and they were dissatisfied with it. The only people who have proved to be dissatisfied with the government's committee system of examining government estimates in detail are the members sitting on the government benches. To say that we can study estimates in detail is just a sham. Under the old system, as has been illustrated in debate today, the responsible minister sat in this House and answered questions in full. Under the present system they may or may not attend the committee, as they choose—not as the committee chooses. As a rule, however, out of courtesy the minister usually comes in and makes a prepared statement which takes perhaps an hour, and he usually remains in committee for another hour.

We have had instances, though, where a minister would not even come to committee or, having made an initial appearance, has never returned. This system of dealing with estimates, where we are dealing with thousands of millions of dollars and a member may get 10 or 20 minutes

[Mr. Danforth.]

once a week to ask questions in a committee that sits only during two or three months, is ridiculous. It is impossible to deal with more than a fraction of the expenditures of a particular department.

Mr. Speaker, this is the system this government says efficiently deals with the scrutiny of the expenditure of \$20 billion of taxpayers' money. If the government sometimes admitted that it made mistakes, it would be a lot more popular with the Canadian people. Why do they not admit this? The Canadian people would accept it, but this Liberal government is not one iota different from the previous Liberal government.

Mr. McGrath: The same old bunch.

Mr. Danforth: When an ill-founded or irresponsible expenditure of millions of dollars has been made, the government feels that the only course of action is to conceal it, not reveal it. The government states that the information is available to the opposition and to the people of Canada. Mr. Speaker, all the people have to do is read *Hansard* and they will see for themselves the lack of responsibility demonstrated by ministers when they are asked questions, and how they constantly seek not only to conceal information but demonstrate a derogatory and contemptuous manner when doing it.

This system is not working, Mr. Speaker, and our debate today will have little effect on the thinking of this government, I am afraid. They feel that they are right, regardless of the fact that every opposition party in the House believes the system is not working. Even though the people of Canada are showing a lack of confidence in the system, the government still feels that it has attained perfection. If things continue as they have in the past, the only change the Canadian people can expect in our parliamentary system in the next few months is one carefully designed by the Liberal government to restrict even further the ability of opposition parties to obtain full information on the expenditure of the tax dollar. Mr. Speaker, they show contempt toward the system we have had since confederation.

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Béchard (Bonaventure-Îles de la Madeleine): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the hon. member.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles de la Madeleine has a question to ask.

Mr. Béchard: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member complains that the present committee system does not allow opposition members to scrutinize the estimates of every department. Could he explain why during hours and hours of session, members of the opposition did not ask any question on the estimates but only on government policy?

[English]

Mr. Danforth: Mr. Speaker, the question just demonstrates the arrogance I have been speaking of, because not only do they now want to restrict our questions, but they want to tell us the type of questions we should ask. This is one of the reasons we feel we will not make any progress with the present government.