

Order Paper Questions

EASTERN ONTARIO SUBSIDIARY AGREEMENT

Question No. 3,197—Mr. Cossitt:

1. Since the signing of the Eastern Ontario Subsidiary Agreement between the Government of Canada and the government of Ontario (a) what was the amount contributed by the government to various projects (b) what is a list of all projects and the amount of federal funds contributed in each case (c) in which constituency is each project located and how many projects were located in the constituency of Leeds-Grenville?

2. Are there any projects planned which have not yet been processed and, if so (a) what amount will be contributed by the government to these projects (b) what is a list of the projects and the amount of federal funds to be contributed in each case (c) in which constituency will each project be located and how many will be located in the constituency of Leeds-Grenville?

Return tabled.

[English]

Mr. Smith: I ask, Madam Speaker, that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

Madam Speaker: Shall the remaining questions stand?

Mr. Nielsen: Madam Speaker, I want to raise a point of order concerning the answering of questions on the Order Paper. Some questions have been on the Order Paper for eight to ten months, with a great many having been there longer than six months. Some of them are quite simple and could be answered with little or no effort. It is obvious to me, in looking at the Order Paper, that there are a great many questions which the government has made no effort to obtain answers to. In my submission this can only be by deliberate intention since in the normal course they would be answered automatically.

My colleague the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker) referred to the difficulty opposition members have in getting information out of the government. The hon. member for Wellington-Dufferin-Simcoe (Mr. Beatty) referred to his inability to get information from officials in committee and ministers in the House. The result is, Madam Speaker, that the practice of putting questions on the Order Paper is rapidly becoming a time consuming and rather pointless exercise. The fact is that there are close to 250 pages of unanswered questions on the Order Paper after a session which has gone on for more than 280 days. In fact, there has only been one session longer than this one. It is an indication and an indictment of the government's indifference and arrogance with regard to this institution and the rights and privileges of its members.

If the government, Madam Speaker, does not intend to answer questions on the Order Paper, such as the one the hon. member for Leeds (Mr. Cossitt) has had on for five years and God knows how many weeks and days, if it intends to treat Parliament with such indifference and contempt, then there is little point in putting questions on an Order Paper which grows every Monday.

• (1630)

In my submission, this is something, which hon. members will have to take under advisement. I am not quite sure what the government is trying to do here. Many Canadians are wondering about that. I know we are not here to go through futile exercises at the behest of a government which is in one of

its longest sessions on record and has very little to show for the time that it has spent.

I make the point that if it is the government's policy not to answer questions on the Order Paper, or only to answer the ones with which it is comfortable and which will not embarrass it, then there is little or no point in carrying on with the practice. Perhaps it will be necessary that we have recourse through orders of the House for everything we get. These have already reached an unprecedented number of unfilled orders. If we continue in that way, we may have to seek an opinion from the House on this government's laxity and its contempt of the institution.

It is not surprising that a government which cannot bring down a budget cannot answer questions. That does not surprise me at all. The House is entitled to know whether or not this policy of inaction is a deliberate policy, whether it will continue, or whether hon. members can look forward to receiving answers within a reasonable time limit of a week or two instead of six or seven months or, indeed more than five years.

There was a time when hon. members could indicate the importance of a question by placing an asterisk beside it, a starred question. That practice has fallen into disuse, because it is being ignored by the government. Hon. members placed a star beside a question to indicate its urgency and to require an oral answer. At one time that was a respected practice of this House.

It does no good for the parliamentary secretary to tell us how well he has done in answering over 2,000 questions. The fact is that since this practice commenced, the number of hon. members of this House has substantially grown. That is one of the reasons more questions are being asked.

Another reason more questions are being asked is this government's obsession with secrecy and its resistance to providing information of any kind to hon. members. If this continues much longer, we in the opposition will have no recourse but to ask that Your Honour exercise your discretion in favour of upholding the rights of hon. members, and to entertain with favour a question of privilege which will have to be posed if we are to be continually refused by the government. The whole matter will have to be referred either to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, or to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, because the logjam must be broken. The government must change its attitude and adopt one of providing information to the people of Canada, through their representatives on all sides of this House, to which they are entitled.

Mr. Smith: Madam Speaker, I happen to think that the alleged point of order which the hon. member for the Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) has just raised is totally spurious.

A couple of facts should be pointed out. First of all, as of today the government has answered over 2,793 questions, taking considerable time and at considerable expense to the government. For example, today the answers to two questions were made orders for returns because the answers were so