

Appropriation Act No. 8

concerned, nor from listening to the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre, as far as the members of his party are concerned, I should like to say this: The legality of certain issues which arise from time to time may be subject to question. As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, without giving away any secrets may I say that today in the public accounts committee the Auditor General, through a very sensible arrangement which was reached some time ago, now has access to competent counsel. And he should have this access because he is the agent and servant of parliament, not of the government. Merely because the Minister of Justice and his officials, who constitutionally are the advisers of the Governor in Council and the respective ministers of the crown, give a certain opinion to the government, that opinion is not necessarily vested with the sanctity of certainty.

Many hon. members here who are members of the bar have challenged the opinions of legal officers of the crown and have carried their case successfully to the highest courts of the land. We listen to them with respect, of course, because usually they are basically correct and are accepted as such. We have never suggested that, other than incidentally, the question of legality would be considered. On that point, I agree completely with the minister.

However, I think I made quite plain last Tuesday this point with regard to the wording of vote 15 in particular, and I think my fears in this regard have been augmented today. We notice that what I might call the petty cash of government has now been increased from the \$15 million included in the main estimates by an additional \$45 million in the first supplementary estimates, and by another \$50 million in the estimates which have just been filed. This represents petty cash amounting to \$110 million. There may be a need for this and there may not be, but the reason behind the request which I made, and which the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre and others have made, is that this matter can now be considered by the public accounts committee.

● (4:10 p.m.)

As the minister said some years ago, the whole question of the pattern of votes in the estimates is a matter for consideration by the public accounts committee. We considered a great many matters, and I can honestly say that our attention was not directed exclusively or particularly to this issue. Certainly, when I considered this matter I did not contemplate that under the cloak of vote 15 there

would be an item which, in this fiscal year, has reached the total of \$110 million. Because of this state of affairs, we urge that action be taken.

This morning I asked the chairman of the public accounts committee if I could pursue a certain line of questioning of the Auditor General, who was then present. With great regret, and with the acumen which the chairman usually shows, I was ruled out of order.

I am glad the minister has accepted our proposal, because I have touched on the root of the matter. I hope the public accounts committee, with the assistance of the Auditor General, who is the agent of parliament, and the Secretary of the Privy Council, might embark on a useful and essential discussion to consider in detail the wording of vote 15. The public accounts committee feels that certain changes must be made in the wording of this Vote to safeguard the traditional rights and immemorial privileges of parliament in the control of the public purse. It is essential that such a meeting, to undertake such a discussion, be held as quickly as possible. It may be that as a result of our deliberations in the public accounts committee certain changes will be made. Those would be brought to the house, and we may have a good debate. As a result of that debate, changes in the wording of the items in the estimates might be made in ensuing years. It is very important that what I suggest be done.

I am pleased that for once the reasonable and moderate arguments from this side of the house have been listened to, and that the minister has accepted our proposal. I hope what has happened, if I may say so objectively, will be a lesson to other ministers.

Mr. Bigg: Mr. Chairman, I also am a member of the public accounts committee. I believe we are the watchdogs of the public purse, and when I say that I come down to the root of the powers of parliament. If the government was able to enlarge vote 15 to \$110 million this year, I do not know why the vote could not be increased to \$500 million next year in order to get around the power of parliament.

Mr. Benson: Mr. Chairman, may I be allowed to interrupt the hon. member? I am not asking a question, but rather making an explanation.

The particularly large increase in vote 15 this year was necessary because of the great amount on supplementary payrolls. The hon. member may recall that a strike was settled,