

today's order paper, namely, notices of motions and public bills.

Mr. Reid: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I believe there is general agreement to take first motion No. 9 standing in the name of the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS

[English]

THE MINISTRY

SUGGESTED COMMITTEE STUDY OF POWERS, PREROGATIVES AND PRIVILEGES OF OFFICE OF PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Joe Clark (Rocky Mountain) moved:

That, in the opinion of this House, a committee should be selected to consider the powers, prerogatives and privileges attaching to the office of Prime Minister and to report what safeguards are desirable or necessary to secure the constitutional principles of the sovereignty of parliament and the supremacy of the law.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I should point out to the House that the language of this resolution was drawn from a resolution introduced to the British House of Commons on precisely this topic several years ago. I can say, in a certain hopeful sense, that the resolution was accepted at that time in that House. I hope it will receive similar treatment here today.

● (1700)

In the past ten years there have been a great many deliberate changes in our political institutions. New departments of government have been introduced and a range of new procedures developed from impact studies to local initiative of government spending designed to bring governments and citizens into closer harmony. Last year parliament passed the Election Expenses Act which will end the secrecy of political party financing and encourage all parties to become more active and more broadly based. The rules of parliament have been dramatically changed, and the Speech from the Throne suggested that more radical changes will be proposed. Those changes have been made deliberately, usually after extensive study and public debate.

In that period the office of Prime Minister has also changed dramatically, and it is one of the curiosities of our system that so little serious attention has been paid to the extent or significance of the power of that office. In the United States, books and theories and countless columns are written about the power of the presidency. In Canada, with rare exceptions, we focus for a moment on a sudden growth in staff or an expenditure on suede sofas, and then largely leave the question alone. However, it is too important a question to leave alone and the purpose of this resolution is to allow an examination of the role that should be played by the office of Prime Minister in a modern, federal parliamentary state.

I underline and emphasize the fact that what is sought in this resolution is an opportunity for a committee of this

Office of Prime Minister

parliament to examine the role of the office of Prime Minister. The resolution makes no assumptions about that role except the assumption that the powers of the Prime Minister, like the powers of parliament, should be discussed and decided in public and in the context of the requirements and the traditions of the whole country.

Let me say a word about those traditions. In my view there is no tradition in Canada of a weak Prime Minister. We are told, in parliamentary theory, that the Prime Minister is merely the "first among equals" in parliament, with the assumption that Her Majesty can quite easily choose another of us equals to be first. That is the theory. In fact, the Prime Minister has always been a strong figure in Canada, with his parliamentary leadership buttressed by his party leadership and with official responsibilities and an official reputation far beyond those of his peers and at least equal to those of Her Majesty.

Therefore, the tradition is not the theoretical tradition of being merely the first among equals, answerable to the Queen but, rather, the practical tradition of exercising leadership in a federal state with a parliamentary system which requires the governors to be responsible to the governed through this parliament. Nobody is suggesting that we go back to a weakness that never was. However, throughout our history there has been another tradition to balance the necessary strength of the office of Prime Minister; that is, that the powers of the Prime Minister should not be developed or exercised in isolation but must be set in a federal parliamentary context and be subject to detailed and regular parliamentary scrutiny. There is no such scrutiny today.

The Prime Minister comes to the question period on most days, but the questions are usually about his judgment, seldom about his powers; and anyway there is no requirement that he answer. After the so-called Pearson precedent of 1968 there is a real question whether parliament can defeat a Prime Minister by vote in this House, except on matters of obvious confidence, like a budget. If our capacity to defeat a Prime Minister is so limited, so is our capacity limited to control him by the threat of defeat. As the chief minister, he is less bound by Treasury Board than any of his colleagues, and appointments to or by his office can be made without recourse to the Public Service Commission. His estimates are brought before the miscellaneous estimates committee. However, they are not dealt with there by him, but by a parliamentary secretary to another minister.

The Prime Minister reports to no standing committee and there is no statute to define his responsibilities. Ironically, parliament probably has less real control over the Prime Minister than we have over the president of Air Canada or the president of CNR, because a Crown corporation is established by statute while the Prime Minister's office is not, and its officials must appear regularly before standing committees while the Prime Minister's officials do not. No matter how loosely you define "responsible" government, parliament should have some direct control over the actions of its Prime Minister beyond his mere appearance for questions in the House. If that has been important in the past, I suggest it will be even more critical in the future, for reasons I will enumerate.