

National Defence Act Amendment

I might mention to the hon. member that there is a dispute, if I may use the word, between the press gallery and others about whether that part of the public gallery has been assigned to the press gallery and whether they have authority over it. So far as the Speaker is concerned, the authority of the press gallery over that particular row of seats has never been confirmed. Therefore in the circumstances departmental officials have used these particular seats. I assume that is what is being done now, but this is only theorizing on my part because, as I mentioned at the outset, I have no way of knowing who is now occupying those seats. I presume that is the explanation of the point raised by the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre. In any event, I will look into the matter.

Mr. Churchill: I would just say, Mr. Speaker, that at this distance they do not look to me to be departmental officials and therefore I think they should be expelled from their position.

Mr. Speaker: I will look at them and see whether they look like departmental officials.

• (4:10 p.m.)

Mr. D. W. Groos (Victoria (B.C.)): Mr. Speaker, the activities which have been generated by the bill now before the house were referred to in an article which I read the other day as being a collision between the minister and the admirals. I do not know about that but I recall reading recently an authoritative book about accidents at sea and I was amused to see on the front page a single anonymous quotation which might interest the house in connection with this debate. It read: "Collisions at sea should be avoided. They can spoil your whole day". Some aspects of the matter now being debated have spoiled not only my whole day but also my whole summer and my whole winter, and I hope we do not intend to let them spoil our whole spring.

I had planned to make my contribution to this debate in the usual form and I had prepared a number of quotations from famous men showing how right the government is in introducing its unification legislation. However, on reading what has already been said in the newspapers and magazines and in the lengthy debate on interim supply, and having listened to the debate yesterday and today, I have come to the conclusion that this would be pointless now because it is evident to me that little that is new can be added to what has already been said somewhere.

[Mr. Speaker.]

The battle lines in this debate have been drawn, and like Wellington before Waterloo we are going through the motions of a sort of parliamentary gavotte before we get down to the real business before us, which is of course the vote on second reading. It is the form of this political dance which bothers me, and it disturbs me to the point where I feel that I must unburden myself to the house for a few moments on this subject.

As every backbencher knows, a backbencher has plenty of scope for contemplation. In contemplating parliamentary work generally and this debate in particular I am struck by the way our excesses in the house come back to haunt and plague us all. Debates on matters as close to the heart as this one generate in many of us a heat which gives rise to exchanges across the floor and in the press that amount to nothing less than slander and are a form of character assassination which leaves grievous and lingering wounds. It seems to me that all of this serves but little the cause of parliament and the people's business.

The general excuse, and how often we have heard it, is to say, he did this or he said that when we were over there, meaning the other side of the house from wherever the speaker happens to be. I know I am not the first to say this but I hope I will be the last to have to say that this is ancient history and it matters not one bit to the great majority of us. It should be forgotten, dead and buried. In my view it is inexorably poisoning the atmosphere and killing our work in this house, work which somehow has to be done. I point the finger at no one because I could not do so if I tried. I suppose we are all guilty of at least encouraging or in any event condoning this kind of debate.

I feel that we are too inclined, in the security and isolation of this chamber and elsewhere, to try to impute motives, however subtly we do it in order to get past Your Honour's watchful eye, and too inclined to place in question the integrity of the opponents of our own point of view. We do this when surely the real point at issue in every case, as it is in this case, is one of judgment. Is the government right in its judgment in introducing this legislation on a unified force? Some say this and some say that, some say yes and some say no, but it is all a matter of judgment, and the questioning of motives and integrity has no place no matter how subtly it is done.