

Supply—Finance

Mr. Bell (Carleton): Mr. Chairman, the Minister of Finance will be back in his seat in just a moment.

Hon. Donald M. Fleming (Minister of Finance): Mr. Chairman, on this first item in the estimates of the Department of Finance I am very glad to have an opportunity to make a statement to the committee, particularly in relation to the recent meeting of the commonwealth economic consultative council at Accra. I say I particularly welcome this opportunity because of the extent of the error and confusion which has been created by reports and editorial comments that I have observed since the conference. It seems to me that never in my experience in public life have I seen so much inaccuracy and misunderstanding in regard to any conference or positions taken at it or the results of the conference.

What we have been witnessing in Canada, and indeed elsewhere, in the past fortnight is something of a welter of speculation, very inaccurate speculation, on the part of persons who obviously were not present at the conference, for it was a conference that was held behind closed doors. A great deal of misinformation has been spread about. I welcome, therefore, an opportunity of correcting in so far as I can the gross inaccuracies which have been evident in this connection. The latest one to come to my knowledge was uttered on "Preview Commentary" yesterday morning when the spokesman took it upon himself to say that the Minister of Trade and Commerce and I at the Accra conference took what he called "an anti-British line". I do not like to use harsh terms but I have to call a statement of that kind by its proper name. I have to say that that statement is a blatant lie. It is a downright falsehood. Why people should make irresponsible statements of that kind I shall never be able to understand.

I think that as far as all hon. members of this house are concerned it is unnecessary for me to make any such statement as this, but in view of that kind of misstatement let me make it very clear that when the time comes when Canadian ministers at a conference of that kind, or at any conference, take an anti-British line, I will not be a minister. I am sure the delegates attending that conference on behalf of the other commonwealth countries would have been utterly amazed if they had heard such a misstatement.

The commonwealth economic consultative council was established pursuant to a decision taken at the Montreal trade and economic conference of 1958. Clause 18 of the report of that conference reads as follows:

Commonwealth consultation and co-operation in economic matters are of primary importance in

[Mr. Benidickson.]

achieving our objectives in the economic field. We are agreed that the present machinery for consultation is working well; it is flexible and informal and well fitted to the family character of the commonwealth relationship. We decided that the existing arrangements should be co-ordinated under the name of a commonwealth economic consultative council. We welcomed an offer by the United Kingdom government to provide a commonwealth house to be available for the constituent bodies of the council and for other commonwealth meetings.

The commonwealth economic consultative council has now held three annual meetings. Those of 1959 and 1960 were held in London, and this year's meeting was held in Accra. It was the first time that a commonwealth meeting at government level has been held in Africa, and the significance of Africa as a continent on the world's stage as well as the significance to the commonwealth of the African countries of the commonwealth was recognized in the acceptance of the invitation of the government of Ghana to hold the convention in Accra.

Numerous matters were discussed at the conference. The meeting itself lasted three days, and the days were fully occupied by discussion. This conference was attended for the first time by Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Cyprus in self governing capacities. I shall not delay the committee by reviewing the other subjects discussed, in view of the absorbing interest which has been attracted to one subject in particular. However, I have put this matter in its setting in order to show that this was one of a number of subjects which were discussed. I refer in particular to the question of the approach of the United Kingdom to the European economic community with a view to negotiating possible terms for joining that community.

Let me make it clear at the outset that the decision in this matter is, and always has been, recognized by all the commonwealth countries as one for the government of the United Kingdom. There can be no question about that. There never has been any question about that. In the communique which was issued here in Ottawa on July 14 following a meeting of Canadian ministers with Mr. Duncan Sandys representing the government of the United Kingdom to discuss this subject, the following sentence appears:

The Canadian ministers recognized that this is a matter for decision by the British government.

That continues to be the position. No one has ever questioned that. Why, then, has this subject become a matter of commonwealth consideration? Well, this is a subject of great concern to the countries of the commonwealth and, broadly speaking, for two very good reasons. First of all, if the United Kingdom accedes to the community on the basis of the treaty of Rome, which