

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, February 19, 1975

The House met at 2 p.m.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

PRIVILEGE

MR. STANFIELD—RIGHT OF HOUSE OF COMMONS TO CONTROL SUPPLY—PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

Hon. Robert L. Stanfield (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege concerning what I think is the most ancient privilege of the House of Commons under our parliamentary system, the right of the House of Commons to control supply. It might be said that that right is more than a privilege; it is the *raison d'être* of the House of Commons. Without that right, we do not have a parliamentary system.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanfield: Under the present Standing Orders which govern the examination of estimates and the voting of supply, in view of the rulings of the Chair on the interpretation of those Standing Orders and the pressures on standing committees when they are considering the estimates, as well as the utter impotence of the House of Commons at the report stage of the estimates—except if the government is in a minority position—the House must reject expenditures which are in the public interest in order to reject expenditures which are considered to be not in the public interest. But even when the government is in a minority position there is no way, under the existing rules as interpreted, for the House to reduce or to eliminate expenditures not considered to be in the public good, except by eliminating those which are considered to be in the public good. Due to these fetters on the House of Commons, we are not far from the point when we will no longer have a responsible House of Commons in a parliamentary system.

Today, I believe, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Chrétien) will lay before the House the main estimates of the government for the next fiscal year. These estimates will later be supplemented by supplementary estimates. The estimates, including supplementaries, will probably exceed \$30 billion. After an examination which would be farcical if it were not tragic in its implications for this House and the Canadian people, those estimates involving that vast supply of money will be voted to the disposal of the government, perhaps without being reduced by one dollar or even one cent. This futile exercise will have served only to hold up the examination of the government's legislative program by this House and its committees.

The government leader of the House has already conceded—graciously, I might add—that the procedures of the House dealing with supply are unsatisfactory, but no concrete action has been taken to correct this. Once again the estimates will be presented in the House and we will have to deal with them with unsatisfactory procedures which leave the House impotent. I realize that the minister may refer this question, with others, to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, but that has not yet been done. The motion has not been brought forward and no report that committee makes to remedy our supply procedure with regard to estimates can be brought forward and adopted by this House in time to apply to the consideration of the 1975-76 estimates.

I submit it is essential that we have an ad hoc pro tem remedy for this predicament, for this loss of our ancient privileges. If you agree, Mr. Speaker, that I have a question of privilege, I would move, seconded by the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe (Mr. Wagner):

That the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization be authorized to meet forthwith to consider, report upon and recommend a sessional order that will allow debate, amendment, and vote by the House with respect to a selected number of estimates in the main estimates for 1975-76 or upon any portion of each estimate so selected; and that the committee report back with its recommended sessional order within ten days from the adoption of this order.

● (1410)

Mr. Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) was good enough to give the Chair notice of his intention to raise this question of privilege. He indicated only that it related to the examination of the estimates, without giving the detail contained in the motion. Hon. members frequently raise grievances questioning the opportunity of members, under the existing Standing Orders of the House, to put questions in the question period, to receive answers to questions in writing, to debate or amend and, now, to examine the estimates. These are all very important grievances.

This grievance relates to the examination of the estimates. As the Leader of the Opposition has said, it is without question parliament's most important function to examine the spending power of the government of the day. As important as the grievance may be, and as valid and as widespread as the support may be for the grievance or the concern about the status of this House to examine the estimates, the fact is that this status has been arrived at by a series of agreements and amendments to the Standing Orders in the orderly and regular process of establishing the Standing Orders of the House.

While there may be legitimate cause for concern and, indeed, complaint as long as the procedures conform to the Standing Orders, I am not in a position to say that procedures which conform completely to the Standing Orders of this House can in any way constitute a question of privilege.