

Procedure Committee Report

that when United States committees want information they get information.

Mr. Churchill: May I ask a question there? When a United States committee wants to postpone any action whatsoever on legislation can it not delay it for months and even years because of the authority vested in the chairman of the particular committee?

Mr. Fisher: There is no question about that. I was only suggesting that there was a trend—and a reasonable trend, I think—in that direction. I believe we can work out an alternative. The hon. member for Kootenay West, who I hope is going to speak later in the debate, is always eager, like many other people, to extoll the British tradition.

Mr. Herridge: Hear, hear. I am not ashamed of it.

Mr. Fisher: There is no reason why the hon. member should be, but the British parliamentary tradition with regard to the way it operates its committees is quite different from that of this house, and I cannot see that these recommendations are very much in line with what the British do in their house. As hon. members probably know, they believe in much smaller committees, and their estimates committees do not have open meetings. They move around and in a sense are almost committees of investigation. They visit government departments, plants and operations and one of their practices, which I do not think would be acceptable here, is that there is a suppression, if you want, of publicity. The whole idea is to have a small group of people who are experts or developing experts in various fields, and opposition members particularly accept appointment to their committees as appointments to important posts in order that their party and their organization can be up to date on the administration and what is going on.

I have not seen any tendency amongst Canadian parliamentarians to indicate that they would be willing to take part in a committee that would largely meet in camera. As a matter of fact it seems to me that every time a committee of this house meets in camera, which does not happen very often, it causes some kind of hubbub. In this sense I think the recommendations put forward here with regard to particular committees are realistic in view of our own habits and attitudes.

A few months ago our party put forward some proposals for parliamentary reform, and

I want to refer to one of them relating to committees. This was the recommendation:

That the role of the committees be strengthened, by giving them time to meet...by appointing small, effective committees—

We are going to get smaller committees out of this recommendation.

—related to the present day business of parliament, by giving them important work to do, and by providing them with the means to do their work, and by providing for their reports to be considered by parliament. Final decisions would have to remain with the house, but committees should be enabled to do their work and to make their reports in such a way that the ground covered in committee would not have to be covered again. This proposal does not preclude committees from sitting while the house is in session, but it would increase their importance in our parliamentary system.

I should like to refer to a couple of the points mentioned in this recommendation, providing committees with the means to do their work and providing for their reports to be considered by parliament. We have a committees branch in the House of Commons and, Mr. Speaker, I think you are as aware as the rest of us are that the committee clerks are not particularly expert in any field. In a sense their advice comes to us in terms of procedure and in just looking after the routine of the committee. If we go into this kind of committee structure it seems to me it is time to move toward some form of specialization with regard to committee clerks, toward some kind of secretariat so that committees can be more effective.

One of the things that has always bothered me about our house committees is the tendency they have to be cheap. Many times we would like to bring a witness before a committee from somewhere, but you have to go through all the rigmarole of getting signatures and bringing the matter before the committee only to find often that you have to face the embarrassment, which I at least have experienced on several occasions, of being turned down by the committee or of having the whole background of the witness looked into. It seems to me that if members of parliament, as members of the government are always charging, are ready to bring some matter forward, a member of a committee should have the right to bring forward a witness at any time and have the expenses of that witness, particularly if he comes from a distance, met by the committee.

Mr. Churchill: You could bring all your constituents down here.