

ties for information and knowledge, not just for members of the opposition but for all members of parliament, are wanting.

The government refuses to answer ordinary questions. It delays and drags its feet with respect to starred questions. I think we have to examine our system and our rules because they are not functioning in the terms that the 20th century requires. This is very important. As our parliament and our society become more complex, more and more questions will be asked, and our procedures with respect to questions are becoming farcical and irrelevant. I commend the right hon. member for Prince Albert for raising this matter today, and I condemn the government House leader for giving the same old rote and the same old nonsense, rather than taking his responsibility and looking toward improving the procedures which are important to all of us.

Mr. Robert C. Coates (Cumberland-Colchester North): Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak for just a few moments about this matter. I think Your Honour has a special responsibility to individual members because the order paper is not something which is exclusive to members of the opposition. This was pointed out by the previous speaker. The order paper is available for all members of parliament so that they can seek information and obtain facts.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. MacEachen) endeavoured to indicate that there should be a set of rules to determine how questions are put before they appear on the order paper, but there is definitely a determination made by members of Your Honour's staff as to the form of questions before they appear on the order paper. Questions must seek information and must not be partisan or political. The approximately 1,400 questions which at the moment are unanswered are not partisan political questions, but questions asking for facts. Members of parliament, whether they be Liberal, Social Credit, New Democratic or Progressive Conservative, have a right to ask questions, and the public has the right to know the answers.

Unfortunately, questions on the order paper have been taking up more and more of the time of this House because of questions of privilege of this nature. There is unwillingness on the part of the government to provide individual members of parliament with facts to which they have a right. As the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton (Mr. Baker) has pointed out, the more the government involves itself in the lives of individual Canadians in one way or another, the more questions will appear on the order paper.

Since I have been here I have watched the attitude of the government change toward questions on the order paper. When I first came here, a starred question which appeared on the order paper was usually answered within a period of two weeks. The starring of a question indicated an urgency that the question be answered orally in the House more or less like an oral question, but that no longer is the case. We have come to the point where a starred question does not mean any more to a minister than any other kind of question.

Unfortunately, questions on the order paper do not mean very much to ministers these days. Your Honour is here to

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protect individual members of parliament, and Your Honour is here to prevent the rights of individual members from being trampled upon by the government, but that is what is happening when the government refuses to answer questions.

● (1612)

I do not know what Your Honour can do. I do not know if Your Honour can be the boss of the executive branch of government, but I realize it is your duty to assist us in our work. If Your Honour set down some ground rules, that would assist individual members of parliament. In the last three or four years, I have put a question in one session and have been required to put it again in the next session. By the time an answer is provided, in my experience it has been worthless. As a matter of fact I have stopped using the order paper to secure information, as I once did. The government almost places a time limit on answering questions. Thus, when I receive the information, it is well beyond the point where it is of any value or significance whatsoever.

There must be a time limit in which the government answers a question. For example, if the government does not answer a question within three months, then the minister responsible should be required to stand in the House and explain the reason for that. At least the public would know whether the government is preventing the individual member from securing the information he and the taxpayers of Canada have a right to know. It is similar to the tale of Rip van Winkle. The government goes to sleep for 20 years before it awakens and decides to provide the facts which were requested by a particular hon. member. Parliament is made to look foolish by the government, because government or opposition members cannot obtain facts to which they have a right.

Once again the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) has indicated his great concern for this institution. In his own way he is endeavouring to tell Your Honour what has to be done in order to ensure this institution remains viable in the minds of all Canadians. Because of that, I hope Your Honour arrives at a solution to a problem which has been a continuing, growing, and worsening problem in this parliament and in previous ones.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Adrien Lambert (Bellechasse): Mr. Speaker, I do not want to extend the debate on that point of order but since it is very important, I think it is my duty to state the views of my party on the matter. I would like to say first that all the points raised by right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) were unbiased and that in his answer the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. MacEachen) wanted to justify the fact that many questions have remained unanswered.

Mr. Speaker, what surprises me is the fact that since I have been elected here I have often heard the Chair say to an hon. member that his question should be put on the order paper. I think the Chair should let the hon. member ask his question and if an oral answer cannot be obtained during the question period or the information requested is too exhaustive, the hon.