

House of Commons Procedures

● (9:20 p.m.)

Every week there are dozens of examples of questions which do not meet these requirements. I do not think this holds so true with regard to written questions, but I am sure a number of these should not be accepted. I personally prefer to put starred questions and to get oral answers in most cases. But if you put down a starred question and it stays on the order paper for five or six weeks, it is hopeless. I make a practice of splitting up my questions so that they do not relate to more than one department, and then there is no excuse for making them an order for return.

On the whole I think this Government has done fairly well in answering written questions. But could we not get some rule or procedural arrangement which would, in a sense, allow for something like an adjournment debate if within a certain period of time a department had not answered a particular question? This would place a degree of pressure on the department, prompting a reply as soon as possible. It would also be a means of giving some satisfaction to individual Members. My suggestion is, I repeat, that with regard to written questions and particularly with regard to starred questions to be answered orally, a committee should examine the situation, having in mind the possibility of introducing a procedure as a means by which an hon. Member whose question has not been answered within a certain time would get some redress—for example, the equivalent of an adjournment debate during which he could raise the issue in which he was interested. I realize that no one in the Government is likely to speak on this subject: I am really addressing my remarks to Mr. Speaker.

This brings me to the position of Government Members during the question period. I have no objection to the younger Member for Halifax, or the Member for Lotbinière or the Member for York-Humber rising to ask questions from time to time. From my experience in this Parliament no more than ten or 15 Members supporting the Government have made a practice of asking questions on the Orders of the Day. But when we have a situation where the question period is limited to half an hour on four days a week, and an hour on the other day, it seems to me there will be some block against the asking of questions by Government supporters in terms of the umbrage likely to be caused among Members of the Opposition. There is also the onus which is placed on the Speaker.

[Mr. Fisher.]

After all, it is the Speaker who has to recognize hon. Members. I noticed my friend from Winnipeg North standing up for an hour today; the hon. Member for Carleton was bobbing up and down for a long time before he was recognized. Being recognized by the Speaker is one of the factors which is involved during this question period. I put it to Mr. Speaker that he will need to handle this whole question of the recognition of Government Members very carefully. People get to their feet to raise a question—

Mr. Pickersgill: Would the hon. Member allow me to ask him a question? Does he not think it would be a good idea if we were to restore the old practice which prevailed two or three Parliaments ago when Ministers were generally given notice of these questions before they were asked in the House? Instead of having a daily quiz program we followed this practice. Does the hon. Member not think its revival would result in far better answers and a far speedier operation of the whole business? I think this is the only Parliament in the world where questions are asked without notice first being given.

Mr. Fisher: Really, the hon. Member for Royal put his finger on it there. The British practice is, of course, to give notice. Over there they take their questions and make a list of them. The real spice during the British question hour comes from the supplementary questions. In this field my hon. friend from Kootenay West is an old practitioner. He does this. I do not say this is the reason why the Speaker, in recent months, has been anticipating his questions and declaring them out of order. Sometimes I think my hon. friend is not unhappy when this occurs because he is given the opportunity of dealing with the subject at ten o'clock. When I first came here he told me this was the practice, and I followed this practice. Then I noticed that very often, if a Minister was given four or five hours warning, his assistant would prepare a long answer which, very often was evasive. He would then read this in the House, and the Member asking the question faced an embarrassing situation. After such a long reply, what should he do?

There is another practice—and I am talking about what really happens, not about formalities. I can recall one occasion when I gave notice of a question concerning a strike in progress against the Northern Ontario Pipe Line Corporation. I received a telephone call