

Supply—Privy Council

It used to be the case, and as a matter of fact this is the way the system should work, that if a minister was necessarily absent on government business, somebody else in the cabinet was acting minister and answered for him. During the upwards of six years that I was a member of the cabinet I was at different times the minister of two departments but I was also acting minister for one or two other ministers if they were away. At that time we considered it our responsibility as acting ministers to take notice, if we could not answer a question immediately, and bring in the answer the next day. The fact that ministers have to be away from time to time on government business is no reason in the world why they should not be in the house when they are in Ottawa, and when they are away an acting minister or parliamentary assistant should be able to take notice and answer a question next day. I can see nothing but a gradual decline in our whole constitutional situation and the effectiveness of this house if this experiment is continued.

Mr. Nowlan: Without being provocative, Mr. Chairman, I would like to make a few remarks from the point of view of a member who is not on the front benches. I spoke on this matter the other day and I am not going to belabour the point. Having seen this experiment in operation for a week I can say it is a perfect example of theory which does not work when applied in practice.

To echo the words of the former minister of agriculture, if hon. gentlemen opposite had had the luxury of sitting in opposition and observing the practice of the question period from that point of view they would see how this theory does not work. The President of the Treasury Board supported the proposition that often theory does not work in practice, and I agree with him, not to mention the President of the Privy Council who said that the theory sounds logical, reasonable and businesslike. But the President of the Treasury Board says that this system represents an approach of a government that is serious and sensible and that this will be reflected across the nation.

If I were sitting on the treasury benches and had this rotation system imposed upon my movements, with the Prime Minister answering general questions and questions of policy, it would be an indication of how the Prime Minister regarded my competence in answering questions in the house. As we have seen during the past week it is the Prime Minister who is overexposed to handling

questions from the opposition and he has to turn many of them aside for the responsible minister to return.

Because of the pressures of work there is a natural rotation of cabinet ministers. We all admit that no cabinet minister worth his salt, and even no private member, can sit in the house day in and day out. We and the cabinet ministers have other business to attend to outside the chamber. But to have an arbitrary rotation system imposed upon the natural rotation system is unnecessary, and the explanation given by the President of the Treasury Board of the arbitrary system proves the case for the opposition.

Only this morning the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, the Minister of National Revenue, the Minister of National Health and Welfare and the Minister without Portfolio (Mr. Richardson) were not in their places to answer questions even though they were supposed to be here under the Prime Minister's rotation system. In fact, as already mentioned, there were only eight ministers present.

Under the Prime Minister's system, if a minister appears in the house three times a week he will spend a maximum of two hours and ten minutes in the house, 60 minutes one day, 30 minutes another day and 40 minutes on the third day. If he is on the short side of the rotation system and does not have to be present during the weekly one hour question period, he will spend only one hour and 50 minutes in the house. I admit that with motions and other measures ministers will spend longer in the house than that, but their attendance will vary from a maximum of two hours and ten minutes a week to one hour and 50 minutes a week during the question period. The Canadian people expect a little more seat time than that from our cabinet ministers.

The Prime Minister said that his system was logical and reasonable. Under the new system we have to give notice of a question. If it concerns a related department it will have to be repeated next day. There is also the functional problem of inter-related questions where, depending on the answer from the original minister, a supplementary question may be required to be directed to the Minister of National Revenue or the Minister of Finance.

According to the Prime Minister's new system, which is a complete change from traditional practice, departments will receive questions. He says that if the opposition