

same generosity and let the committee determine the pace at which we want to hear witnesses and the amount of time we need to present a proper resolution to the House of Commons?

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pinard: Madam Speaker, the NDP member has repeated the answer I just gave to the Progressive Conservative leader. The committee is master of its own procedure, but it must act within the confines of the mandate given to it by the House. It is not my intention to go against the decision taken by the House to ask a joint committee to consider the proposed resolution and to report back by December 9. I certainly do not intend to ask the committee to disregard the wishes expressed by the House and also by the Senate. In the meantime, that is until December 9, the committee is free to set the dates at which it will hear witnesses. The hon. member is well aware of the parliamentary procedure and practice as well as of the terms of reference given to the committee and under which it can create subcommittees with various duties. Indeed, under the circumstances, it might not be a bad idea for the committee to divide itself into subcommittees to hear various groups of witnesses.

But I also remind him, in that respect, that in the last few years, there have been other commissions which travelled across the country. The constitutional issue has been discussed across Canada during commission hearings as well as by members of the House during election campaigns and the recent referendum campaign in Quebec. Therefore, this is not a new issue which the committee will consider. It is a national concern, an issue which has been the subject of in-depth study and on which several witnesses have been heard in the past.

The specific task of the committee will mainly be to discuss the amendments to the bill, to refine it in a technical sense and to hear some witnesses. In answer to the NDP member, I want to make it clear that we have no intention of going against the decision made by the House of Commons and by the Senate asking that the committee consider the matter as quickly as possible and report back by December 9. Moreover, it is not our intention to meddle in the affairs of the committee. According to parliamentary practice, we will leave it free to decide its procedure.

● (1510)

[*English*]

Madam Speaker: Quite obviously this is not a point of order. It is an extension of the question period.

Mr. Clark: Not at all.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Jake Epp (Provencher): Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

Point of Order—Mr. Clark

Madam Speaker: Order, please. In the beginning a question was asked about the business of the House. I can allow questions on the business of the House, and if hon. members who are now seeking the floor want to ask questions about the business of the House, I can allow that.

Mr. Epp: Madam Speaker, on the same point of order, arising from comments made by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard)—

Madam Speaker: Order, please. I just said that I did not feel this was a point of order. If the hon. member has a question on the business of the House, I can allow that.

Mr. Epp: Well, on the business of the House, Madam Speaker, the President of the Privy Council indicated in his remarks that the government would hear "a few witnesses".

Mr. Chrétien: No, he never said that.

Mr. Epp: That is what he said.

Mr. Pinard: No.

Some hon. Members: He said that.

Mr. Chrétien: "Many".

Mr. Clark: Perhaps he means "plusieurs".

Mr. Epp: We have had assurances in this House, and hon. senators in the other place have had assurances from the Senate leader over there, that in fact witnesses would be heard. Surely it is a point which must be clarified now, whether instructions were given to the members of the committee on the government side. Not only was the House stopped from speaking through closure, but now Canadians who want to appear as witnesses will not have that opportunity. In fact they are to be stifled even before they have a chance to appear.

Some hon. Members: Shame!

Mr. Epp: That is the point. Also on this point of business I want to ask the President of the Privy Council a question. He said that this question has been asked before and that there have been joint committees and royal commissions travelling across the country. The point of the matter is that on this proposed resolution that has not taken place.

Mr. Chrétien: That is not what he said.

Mr. Clark: Read the record.

Mr. Epp: That is not what has taken place, and this has not been before the Canadian people. So, it needs clarification before the committee sits, whether the President of the Privy Council in fact has now instructed that there will be only a limited number of witnesses heard, and also that he has no intention to follow up what was said in the other place by the Senate leader there that in fact consideration would be given to the extension of the time of the committee.