

*Supply—Privy Council*

information during the question period as we would like but the question period is, I submit quite frankly, not just a time for asking and receiving information. It is a time of straight political warfare. I see nothing wrong with it. I think it is part of the parliamentary process. It is an opportunity for the opposition to keep the government on its toes. The question period is one opportunity we have to do this.

It is my submission that if the government continues as it did this morning, and this takes place every Friday, we will have trouble keeping the opposition members here. They will ask: What is the use of being here on Friday? I think this is a serious attempt to make the question period much less effective and less important. I believe the government is doing a disservice to parliament because of this course which is being followed.

Every time this discussion about the question period is raised someone tells us how this is handled at Westminster. The President of the Privy Council was not ploughing new ground when he did this today. It was interesting last February that there was almost a unanimous feeling on the part of the members who visited Westminster that Westminster had much to teach us, but not in this area. When members of this house went over there and saw how their question period operated they said: This is not for us. Some of the members of that committee are in the house at this time and I am sure they agree with me.

The other point I want to make is that you just cannot compare the two systems, because they are completely different. The minister suggests that over there written notice has to be given in respect of every question. This is 99 per cent true, but there are such things as very urgent and "super-urgent" questions which the front benchers on the opposition side can ask. But for the most part questions are put on the order paper. In addition, there is roughly an hour every day which is virtually an hour of debate or political warfare.

The minister says that on most days only one minister will be answering questions. That is true, although on some days there can be two or three. We all know what happens here. The parliamentary secretary gets up and says questions numbered so and so are answered. Over there the minister gets up and goes to the dispatch box to answer questions. After each answer there may be six or eight supplementary questions and a debate

of the kind we have here on orders of the day.

What bothers me is that ministers like the President of the Privy Council want to adopt the aspect of the British system which requires that notice be given of questions but do not seem to want to adopt the practice of having the discussion period which they have over there. I think it is quite unfair to make this kind of a comparison. Even with the liveliness when the Prime Minister was on the griddle we felt there was something lacking because members were not able to put questions to other ministers.

Let me remind you that the responsibilities of the United Kingdom house are much broader than ours. We sometimes refer to the fact that theirs is a unitary system of government while ours is a two level system. They have what amounts to three levels in one. They are dealing with matters that we deal with federally, provincially and municipally. These matters are all dealt with on the floor of that parliament. On top of this they have their debates on adjournment motions. There are all sorts of opportunities for venting grievances and airing things that bother them.

If I felt this government was trying to move in the direction of creating more opportunities for legitimate political warfare, such as is involved in the question period, I would go along with it. I am thoroughly convinced that the government is not trying to move in that direction but is trying to move in the direction of cooling off the question period. If we have many more mornings like today with only six or eight cabinet ministers here we will have fewer members on the back benches and Friday will be a worse day than it is now.

• (12:40 p.m.)

Incidentally, Mr. Chairman, speaking of questions, my colleague the hon. member for Vancouver East asked a question this morning in the absence of the President of the Privy Council, who we now learn was at a very important cabinet committee meeting, about the announcement that all the organization meetings of committees slated for Tuesday have been cancelled, not just this one or that one but the whole works. I am told the external affairs committee will still meet on Tuesday morning, but all the organization meetings of committees on Tuesday have been cancelled.