

Constitution of Canada

Some committee chairmen feel that all this is their responsibility and they have become so possessive with regard to committees that they refer to them as "my committee". What utter nonsense! They have merely been elected chairmen of committees and not the leader of—but this is not a senatorial or House subcommittee funded with a great deal of money, as happens in the American Congress. In Canada these committees belong to this House. Each committee has a chairman, and if a chairman feels he must become that possessive then he should certainly be replaced very quickly. In any event, these committees should sit for the benefit of the members and not for the benefit of the chairmen.

● (2:10 p.m.)

As much as possible, committees must avoid sitting whilst the House is sitting. We have grave staff limitations, and three committee sittings a day pile up the work and the costs. One has merely to look at how the costs of the legislative processes have escalated within the last year or two, and at the demands made on space and on personnel. What is the use of considering legislation in committee if it takes three weeks for the blessed committee reports to come back into this House?

Members of the House do not get the committee reports on time, but all too often the government House Leader has called for legislation to be considered the day after the final committee report appears at a time when no one has yet had a chance to examine the report. Legislation is being railroaded through the House because of these administrative roadblocks.

I agree with some of my colleagues who say that the platooning of replacement members of committees is wrong. We have seen roving squads of members whose chief ability is to sit in on committees, read newspapers, sign letters and at the same time raise their right hands in approval of matters on which they have had no previous experience. These members have not participated in the committee discussions, and are merely present to fill a seat or fill out a quorum. This is quite wrong. Let all members of committees be placed thereon following a resolution of this House so to do and not in the casual slipshod way now prevailing.

The last point I wish to make with regard to committee chairmen is to acknowledge that there are some very notable exceptions. Chairmen of committees are not supposed to act as chief government hatchet men. They are not the chief proponents of legislation. They are not the chief defenders of government legislation. When they act in that way, they are acting completely contrary to the rules. The rules state that the chairman shall preside over the meetings of a committee and apply the rules in the same way as the Speaker does in this House. The Speaker is not an active, partisan participant in the deliberations of this House, and committee chairmen should not be partisan either. The sooner some of the chairmen learn this lesson the more peaceful and the better meetings we will have.

[Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West).]

I have reservations about this particular motion in the terms in which it has been drawn. I think this was done perhaps as the result of a misunderstanding. I am not going to vote against it but I have entered very serious caveats. If we had an undertaking from the chairman of the committee that future plans for travelling by the committee will be explained to the House we would eliminate any possibility of further misunderstanding. Certainly other committees should be wiser, and take heed of what has transpired on this occasion.

[Translation]

Hon. Martial Asselin (Charlevoix): Mr. Speaker, if I rise on this motion, it is not to criticize the principles colleagues of mine have put forward on the structure and efficiency of the committees. I agree with the principles mentioned today to the effect that the House must always remain master of the committees. My colleague from Wellington (Mr. Hales) has pointed out, with great eloquence, how much the trips taken by committee members cost. We must congratulate him, as representatives of the people, for wanting to save the taxpayers' money by seeing to it that those trips cost as little as possible.

My colleague from Wellington gave eloquent figures on the expenditures of certain committees.

I do not believe that even one of my colleagues is against the establishment of the committee on the constitution. Insofar as I am concerned, I have been asking for this since 1965, and I am pleased to see that the government has decided to set up such a committee.

I would have liked it better if the discussion on the fundamental principles, the structure, the operation and the deficiencies of the committees had not taken place today on the occasion of the establishment of the committee on the constitution.

Some committee members travel, when they should not do so, and on that score, I agree with the statement made by my colleague from Wellington to the effect that we should, as much as possible, save the taxpayers' money by reducing these trips to the minimum.

Some hon. members suggested that today's discussions showed that our party is opposed to the establishment of the committee on the constitution. If they believe that, they are mistaken and I rise simply to put the record straight. No member of my party is against it, and the less so now that we are going through such a difficult period, now that the federal-provincial conferences have failed to find some machinery to amend the constitution or repatriate it.

During the last federal-provincial conference, the premiers of the provinces and the Prime Minister of Canada (Mr. Trudeau) discussed some means that could possibly lead to amending the constitution. Unfortunately, nothing has been achieved in this respect.

● (2:20 p.m.)

Personally, I expect a great deal from the work of the Special Committee on the Constitution. In fact, if we can