

Canadian National Railways

to Vancouver and other points, has been established. The committee is entitled to know that and the minister has not given us that information.

I return to the point I made earlier. There are many hon. members of this house who are not members of the standing committee. If we were to accept the position taken by the minister no one who is not a member of the standing committee could ask questions, because the minister would simply rise and say "Oh well, you should have been present at the meeting of the standing committee and asked for the information there." That is silly. That is not in accordance with the tradition of parliament and the procedure under which we operate. I feel the minister should obtain the freight rate from his officers and give this information to the committee. He should then tell us how the freight rate has been established in this case.

Mr. Balcer: Unfortunately the hon. member for Laurier did not attend the meeting of the committee, where it would have been so easy for him to obtain the information he requests. I am quite agreeable to the idea of adjourning the debate and securing the information the hon. member requests, which could probably be given to him at 2.30. I shall be pleased to do so if that is the wish of the hon. member.

On the other hand I should like to correct the impression my hon. friend is attempting to create, that we are refusing to give information. We are not refusing to give information, and I consider it unfortunate that the hon. member could not be present yesterday.

Mr. Chevrier: Why does the minister not make one frank admission, that he does not know what the freight rate is.

Mr. Balcer: I have already said that. I stated that I do not have the information before me. I said it was physically impossible for me to give the information because I do not have it in front of me. I do not know offhand what the freight rate is. I am the first to admit I do not know what it is. If I had the information before me I think it unlikely that I would have bothered answering the 15 repetitious questions the hon. gentleman has put.

Mr. Chevrier: There were only two.

Mr. Balcer: It would have been much simpler to divulge the figures, but I do not have them as I have already told the hon. gentleman.

Mr. Pickersgill: Mr. Chairman, the minister has made a frank admission for which we respect him, but it does raise a point that has arisen repeatedly, not just with respect to

this bill but with respect to many others. It arose last night in another context with another minister.

Mr. Churchill: Let the hon. member confine himself to this bill.

Mr. Pickersgill: In the days when the former government was in office ministers were accustomed, at the committee stage of bills, to have their officials in front of them and to have the information relating to the bills so that parliament could be served. It has now become the custom of ministers to sit there alone, without any administrative officials and without any information, as the minister has admitted he is now doing—

Mr. Churchill: Order.

Mr. Pickersgill:—and to delay the proceedings of parliament because they are not in a position to deal with these matters. When a minister comes here asking us to pass a bill it is his duty to have the information available for those of us who are the masters. The government is the servant and we in this parliament are the masters, and we are entitled to the information. This kind of conduct is tantamount to a contempt of the committee of the whole, which is a committee of the house.

If this had been an isolated case I would not have made these observations at all. However, this has become a custom with the present government. The ministers come here knowing nothing about the legislation, or practically nothing about it; they are unable to answer questions and are without the officials to give them the information. I exempt the house leader; he had his officials on the floor. What I am saying is that far too often this thing is happening, and with a government with that great leader who was going to restore the rights of parliament. May I say that it is an odd way to be treating parliament.

Mr. Churchill: Mr. Chairman, this matter cannot pass without some comment. These generalizations that have been made by the hon. member for Bonavista-Twillingate are unfounded.

Mr. Chevrier: They are not generalizations; they are facts.

Mr. Churchill: They are generalizations that are unfounded. The government has not refused to give information. It has not become accustomed to appear here without the information that is required.

Mr. Chevrier: It has happened in this case.

Mr. Churchill: In this particular instance the hon. member for Laurier is just delaying matters in the House of Commons and holding up a branch line in the province of Manitoba—