

Suggested Improvements to Committee System

more likely, an over-all time limit for such debates could be established and the opposition given the choice of which reports to debate within that time. Perhaps more allotted days could be granted with the express purpose of such debates in mind. Once again, the actual procedure decided upon does not concern me at this stage as much as the principle.

I have also suggested in the resolution, in an effort to strengthen the impact of committee reports, that committees be required to prepare at the end of each session a running record, covering previous sessions as well, of the recommendations it has made to the government and the action the government has taken on them. Such a report could be a powerful weapon in the hands of individual Members of Parliament determined to make the government take some account of the work done in committees.

If, for example, over a period a committee made 27 recommendations and the government did not do anything about them, this could be devastating ammunition in the hands of a member such as the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker). The idea is not original. It is derived from the practice of the British public accounts committee which each year prepares an epitome of proposals. The suggestion is not exactly parallel to the British experience because our committees do not operate in the same way. It is an adaptation of a system that works successfully in another jurisdiction. It is one at which we should look.

I have also suggested that minority reports be allowed to be tabled along with majority reports. It seems to me that democracy not only means majority rule but also respect for minority opinions. It is simply not good enough to say that a member can always issue a press release or express his opinion in the House if he does not agree with a report that he has assisted in drawing up. Such ventures do not have equal weight with a formal written document and tend to be transitory rather than a part of the permanent written record.

Finally, I have suggested that committees be granted a greater degree of independence of government control and that they be allowed an initiative in matters referred to them by the House. I have in mind that committees be allowed to present a resolution to the House suggesting subject matter for them to examine rather than being forced to wait upon the government to take action, as is frequently the case. I think this procedure would overcome the argument that such initiative on the part of committees would tend to obscure the fact that they are and should be subordinate to the House because the House would determine the fate of their requests. The House could always turn down a committee. Moreover, a government need not be unduly worried about what action the committee would take if given this power, because the government would always have the majority on a committee.

The current committee system has been in operation, in roughly its present form, for almost six years. I think it is time its operations were assessed and evaluated by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization and, ultimately, by this chamber. This resolution suggests a number of areas for examination. Many more could be mentioned, such as how committee chairmen are selected and assigned. Should we adopt the British system, where

[Mr. Rowland.]

they are appointed from either the opposition or the government? Should we have a panel of chairmen who would move from committee to committee, members who are schooled in the rules so that committees operate more effectively and efficiently under trained chairmen? These are other considerations which should possibly be looked at by the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization. I could mention many more.

The important thing is that the examination take place as quickly as possible. The issues involved are too important to be pushed under the rug.

• (4:20 p.m.)

Mr. J. A. Jerome (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, this is a very interesting notice of motion dealing with a subject that is very close to all hon. members. I know that several members are anxious to contribute to the debate and I know their contributions will be very valuable. I know that the hon. member for Saint John-Lancaster (Mr. Bell) wants to participate in the debate.

This is a tribute to the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland) who drafted this motion very carefully. It is consistent with his excellent background in politics and his performance in this House. I know, as well, that no less a student of politics, one who has had considerable experience in the committee system as chairman and as member, the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River (Mr. Reid), is anxious to contribute, so I propose not to keep the floor for any longer than necessary.

There are a number of things that should be said relevant to the functioning of the committee system and to specific recommendations put forward in the notice of motion. As background, reference has already been made to the changes in the rules in the functioning of the committee system that came into force in 1965. To me, Mr. Speaker, the whole story of the committee system is one of conflicts of interest or of tensions, as it were, between opposing points of view. It is no coincidence, I am sure, that one faction in the House of Commons was adamant that the changes made in 1965, and the further changes made in the rules in 1969, went a long way to increase the emphasis on committees and therefore received the encouragement of all those who would support this notice of motion put forward by the hon. member. On the other hand, there has been a considerable body of opinion in this House that the effect of those changes, while they increase the emphasis on the committee system, had a devastating effect in downgrading the importance of this chamber. So the whole story begins with a serious conflict of interest in that regard. There is a good deal of merit in both points of view.

You can carry the conflict further by looking at the point of view of the government of the day, on the one hand, and the point of view of the opposition of the day on the other hand. Indeed, the interest of the one in the functioning of the committee system is considerably different from the interest of the other, it being obviously in the interest of the government that the committee be as efficient and as functional as possible but that it keep its disruption of the government's program to a minimum.

Of course, while the opposition has no ingrained opposition to the idea of efficiency or to the functional nature of