

Inquiries of the Ministry

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

MEETING IN CAMERA OF STANDING COMMITTEE

On the orders of the day:

Mr. GORDON GRAYDON (Peel): I should like to ask either the Minister of External Affairs or the hon. member for Cochrane whether invitations will be extended to all members of the Senate and the House of Commons or just to the members of both committees on external affairs to attend the meeting of that committee to be held on Tuesday morning next?

Right Hon. L. S. ST. LAURENT (Secretary of State for External Affairs): Although the hon. member had no opportunity to give me advance notice of his question I am glad to be able to say something here about this sitting of the external affairs committee which is to be held in camera, and to which much more importance has been given in the reports published in the press than is warranted.

My understanding was that a feeling was expressed by members of the committee that they would like to have an opportunity of getting frank expressions of opinion from the officials of the Department of External Affairs which they would not feel free to state for publication. It was suggested that that might be done in one of the ordinary meetings of the committee which would be held in camera, as committees of this house frequently have met in camera for the purpose of thinking out loud and without having reports of their proceedings published. When that became known it was suggested that the members of the committee of the other place would also like to have that kind of meeting, and because of the large volume of work to be attended to between now and prorogation it was suggested that the two bodies might meet together.

The question was subsequently put whether other members of either house could attend. There certainly can be no objection to that. As to whether there should be any invitation to other members who might wish to attend, I do not think that is necessary. It has become known that there is to be this meeting in camera where opinions can be expressed without committing anyone to them, where there can be frank discussions of what would appear to be desirable with respect, for instance, to the timing of the deposit of letters of ratification of peace treaties and such matters. I do not think that there should be any invitation to members of the houses of parliament who are not members of the committees, but I am sure that as far as the officers of the Department of External Affairs are concerned they

[Mr. Church.]

will not have the slightest objection to any member of this house who is interested being present.

Mr. GRAYDON: I was not suggesting that invitations should be given out, but I have seen conflicting reports in the press with respect to the meeting that was to be called and who were to be there, and I thought we should have some clarification.

Mr. ST. LAURENT: I think some of the gentlemen of the press have really attached more importance to this than is warranted. They seemed to feel that there was an implied connection between a session of the committee in camera and the negotiations which have been going on in Paris in connection with the so-called Marshall plan. As far as I know there is no connection whatsoever between them. Had there not been a word said outside of Canada about international affairs for the last month, this meeting in camera would no doubt none the less have been suggested as a convenient way of discussing a little more frankly than one does in a public forum the timing of Canadian actions and the reason for that timing.

Mr. CHURCH: Is there to be any public discussion of external affairs in this house this session? This is the 104th day of the session, and there has been none so far. At these secret meetings they just talk about nothing and do nothing.

Mr. ST. LAURENT: The estimates of the Department of External Affairs will be before the house very soon, and it will depend upon my hon. friend and other members of the house whether there is any discussion.

Mr. CHURCH: Hon. members will not attend a secret meeting; I will not.

Mr. DIEFENBAKER: Following the statement made by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, as a member of the committee on external affairs I want to make it clear that it was not the committee that suggested a secret session. The mystery, if any, resulted from the government's action.

Mr. J. A. BRADETTE (Cochrane): It was not through government instigation that this happened. As chairman of the committee, perhaps I could state what happened so that parliament may be seized of the exact situation. It was suggested by Mr. Pearson that a special meeting should be held in camera by the external affairs committee at which time information could be given to the members of that committee which would be most