

*Point of Order—Mr. Hawkes*

minutes of debate. So the House can decide whether the information must be produced.

What the rule entails is an opportunity for an item to be debated in the Chamber, to be amended in the Chamber, if that is appropriate in the individual case, and to be decided by Members. The alternative is to leave it on the Order Paper.

In many cases, for example, the kinds of questions which the Member brought forward yesterday, invite the Government unilaterally to say it will not answer those questions, it cannot and it should not, for whatever reason. Those replies are very short and very abrupt such as "The information is not available". I have looked at them for over a year. If the questions had been written in a slightly different form with a little more precision they would be an answerable. But the form in which some come forward to Government put a kind of straitjacket on us. Written questions require a written or oral response, as the Member opposite said, but it is to a precise question in which a question is asked that is the problem.

All Members know from their work in committees and work in this Chamber that the more knowledge you have about the subject matter, the more precise your questions can become. You begin perhaps with a general understanding and as information comes forward you can modify your questions, become more precise in getting to the nub of the matter. If these questions were transferred to the Order Paper and debated in this Chamber with all of the wisdom of 295 Members potentially available to that debate, to the amending process and to the decision-making process, it is possible that instead of getting the denial of information—which does happen—we could get the information in a form that would be better used by all Members.

I just could not sit by and hear the arguments about denial of freedom of speech and what brought us to this Chamber. In fact, this enhances accountability to our voters. This transfer to a debatable, amendable and decision-making situation, enhances the role and responsibility of all Members in this Chamber and their freedom of speech.

Most questions can be answered in the 45-day period. That was my experience for the better part of a year. Some questions are clearly not answerable. The information was never collected, therefore, it does not exist and

there cannot be an answer. It does not matter what you do with it. There is this grey line in between. The information is available perhaps but is not readily available. It is not stored in a computer where you can push a button which rolls it out and you have it. It is stored in a different form, in a different way. It is not true for the Government to say the information is not available, but to get it all out in the form in which it is stored would be an enormously time consuming task. The 45 days is totally unrealistic in many cases. It simply could not be done no matter how many resources we put on it.

I remind Members of the difficulty with the Project Ploughshares assertion to parliamentarians about their concerns. Two and a half million little pieces of cardboard came in and plugged up our entire mail distribution system. It is taking months to sort them so they get in the hands of the proper 295 Members. It is taking dollars, time, energy and it cannot be done in 45 days. We cannot distribute the mail in the House of Commons in 45 days no matter what we do. We have the assistance of three different outside firms and we are paying for that.

Some of the questions on the Order Paper are of that kind and I suggest to you that the questions brought to our attention yesterday are different but they have some of the same characteristics. The time it would take to provide the information is of considerable concern to the Government. People would have to be taken away from tasks they are now doing to provide the information. Do we, as parliamentarians, believe that is a priority? The matter, the Government may conclude, and the Government does conclude that it cannot be a priority in the total scheme of things.

So, the Government says to Members the matter is not a priority. Fancy language may be used and all kinds of excuses, but at the nub of it is the notion that the matter makes no logical sense to designate it a priority.

The Members of the House should have an opportunity to say to the Government that it is wrong. It is a priority. The method available is in this room. The Government turns the decision over to the Chamber, rather than sending the question back to the Member. I think the House has been moving through successive reforms in trying to provide opportunities for debate, amendment and decision-making for all Members of the Chamber. Not just for members of Cabinet, not just for