

Business of Supply

Mr. Trudeau: The hon. member for Rivière-à-la-Paix is saying that there will be other days; no doubt there will be some, and I hope the hon. member will have other opportunities to question me. However, I must say that as far as this series of estimates is concerned, it was a matter of being here today or never, because as the House is no doubt aware, there are some questions of international importance which must be discussed relating to the precarious state of the world economy as well as matters related to defense which compel me to be in Brussels next week for those discussions. I must also spend a few hours in Denmark to discuss the problems related to contractual ties and a few hours also for discussions in Luxembourg.

Unfortunately, and I apologize to the House, it was necessary for me to be here today, at least for some time. I can assure the hon. members opposite that the Acting Prime Minister, the House leader, will be present. The officials needed to provide information will be here too.

I also seize opportunity to thank my hon. friend, the House Leader, for having gone to bat for me on many instances, while he was responsible of two very important departments.

[English]

An hon. Member: Why don't you send him, and stick around yourself?

[Translation]

Mr. Trudeau: Mr. Chairman, I am somewhat curious to know what exactly opposition members want to discuss today. I offered to let them launch the debate, thinking that would perhaps give me the opportunity of replying to some of their accusations before leaving later in the day, but they waived that privilege and asked me to open the debate, which I am pleased to do.

However I am a little bit in the dark as to the subjects that I should tackle. In any event, I shall at least touch on three or four, on some of the aspects of the Privy Council administration that seem to worry them. First, I shall deal with the presence of the Prime Minister in the House and in committees. Second, I shall discuss the matter of secrecy, since it seems to have concerned hon. members opposite a good deal. And third, I should like to talk about the expenditures, their size and, what I consider more important, the reason why such expenses appear in the estimates.

[English]

First, on the presence of the leader of the government in parliament, I repeat that when parliament asks one of its members to be present it is his duty to be present in so far as it is possible for him to make himself available, and I have done my utmost today to free as much time as possible in view of the very short notice I had, under these experimental rules, that I would be called upon to appear today. I think that traditionally parliament has been rather gracious in its use of the privilege of asking the Prime Minister to appear before it. As I was saying, the practice goes back more than a dozen years that the Prime Minister has had to appear before parliament with regard to his estimates. Certainly, that is the top priority and I am happy to be here to answer whatever questions I will have time to answer.

However, I want to remind the committee that I am in the House every day during the question period and I answer questions on the order paper. I have learned that since the beginning of this session some 7½ months ago, I have signed more than 100 replies to questions on the order paper; I have attempted to answer 524 oral questions in the House during the question period; and I have been here whenever questions or debates of national importance have arisen, when they have not conflicted with other important engagements, of which the House was always made aware.

The matter of my appearance before a standing committee is another matter. I am informed that it has never happened in modern times, certainly in more than a quarter of a century—I have not gone further back than that—that a prime minister has been forced to appear before a standing committee of parliament. Indeed, last year my colleague the hon. member for Sarnia, a member of my own party, asked me to appear before a standing committee and I answered him by letter, which was made public, in which I gave the reasons I did not want to break that long-standing tradition.

Certainly, members of parliament are absolutely justified in wanting to ask questions about spending in the PCO or the PMO. I have followed the practice of making available to the committee officials who could give all the facts, and indeed have given all the facts that have been asked of them. Parliamentarians, either the House leader or his excellent parliamentary secretary, have followed the practice of standing in for the Prime Minister. I repeat that this has been the practice throughout this modern period in parliament. As I said the other day, apart from being a traditionalist on this, I see no good reason to break that tradition, if only for the reason that answers can be given and have been given, apart—I repeat—from the very detailed answers that I give to written questions, a procedure whereby members of the House and the public can learn of every fine detail such as the price of every kitchen utensil or ashtray that was purchased for 24 Sussex Drive or for my office here.

Therefore, it cannot be a question of getting to know the facts: members can know the facts. If there is more that they want to know, the House leader will be here this afternoon, and so will officials, to answer questions and we will make sure that the questions that are asked by any member of the House will be properly answered. Questions of policy are obviously another matter, and it is quite clear that government officials should not be asked to answer policy questions. As long as we have a parliamentary system with responsible government, we on this side of the House will not permit officials to stand in for ministers just to satisfy the curiosity of some hon. members opposite, so far as I am able.

● (1520)

This matter deals with a question of factual information which the House would want to know as a result of my estimates. I would merely, now, deal briefly with the question of secrecy. This is perhaps not the time to speak at any length on that. I just want to remind the House that in an attempt to circumscribe the concern of the government about the need for certain working documents to be kept secret and not made public, a few years ago we