

Statement by Mr. Speaker on Questions

questions and which, I remind hon. members, are matters of grace, might be asked. These supplementary questions might only be asked by the member who posed the original question, as is the case in the house of commons at Westminster.

3. I would take it upon myself to select questioners in rough ratio to the number of hon. members comprising any one body in the house.

4. No more than 30 minutes would be allowed to elapse from the time on the clock when the first question was asked.

5. Although points of order and questions of privilege would not be allowed with respect to any ruling during the question period, any member who felt himself seriously aggrieved might be permitted to raise a question of privilege about a decision of the chair at the close of the question period. Any such question of privilege would have to be concisely stated and disposed of promptly without appeal.

6. These proposals would be on a trial basis only and considered as experimental for the balance of the present session.

I invite hon. members now or next Monday, which might be better, after they have had a chance to consider these suggestions, to express their views.

If these suggestions meet with the general approval of the house, I propose that they be enforced as of next Monday for the balance of this session.

Right Hon. J. G. Diefenbaker (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I am not going to discuss the direction you have given. As an officer of the house I naturally want to do everything I can to join with you in making the house effective. However, I note that you have engaged in a rather statistical outline and summary, and I feel that the full record should be available. I suggest that a similar record showing the questions asked by the several parties covering the period 1961 and 1962 would be beneficial.

As far as the general purpose is concerned I join with you in a desire to ensure that this house shall be effective and efficient, without denying to hon. members their full right to secure information from the government. I suggest that having available the necessary staff to prepare these statistics, which are very detailed, it would be of great interest to the house, and most helpful in view of your reference to previous speakers, Mr. Speaker Lambert and Mr. Speaker Michener, to see what the situation was during those years.

Mr. T. C. Douglas (Burnaby-Coquitlam): I am sure the house is grateful to Your Honour

[Mr. Speaker.]

for giving such careful thought to this matter of questions on the orders of the day. There has been a great deal of press talk about the length of time which has been taken.

I think two points should be made. The first is that questions are important inasmuch as they are the one method by which members can quickly obtain a response from the government on some important matter. It is the duty of all members of the house, particularly of members who sit in the opposition groups, to question the government from time to time regarding its activities and statements of policy. This is not so true of members who support the government, and the figures show they have not been very active in this regard. That is understandable. On the other hand it is true, I think, that the question period has got out of hand, and many of the questions asked would be better placed on the order paper or left until departmental estimates are before the house.

As far as members of the New Democratic party are concerned, we are prepared to co-operate with Your Honour and with all groups in trying to cut down the question period. We would go so far as to be prepared to limit ourselves to three questions a day, and agree among ourselves who were to ask these questions. We would be prepared to agree to some self denying ordinance. One of the difficulties about setting a time limit is that if ministers insist on reading two and three page replies, the 30 minutes will expire very quickly. If they are evasive and two or three supplementary questions are necessary before we receive the answer we should have been given in the first place, time will again be wasted. But we are prepared to co-operate with Your Honour in any way you think the question period can be improved. If the 30 minutes rule does not work out satisfactorily we can try some other method, but we do wish to expedite the business of the house and we will co-operate with Your Honour in that regard.

Mr. R. N. Thompson (Red Deer): May I join with those who have already expressed their appreciation to Your Honour for having given us this helpful and detailed statement explaining again what this question period is supposed to be, and calling attention to the views of some of your predecessors on this subject. We are grateful for the suggestions you have made with a view to rendering the question period more profitable and efficient.

I am convinced that the question period is one of the most fruitful periods we spend in this house and that there should be no attempt to limit the privilege of obtaining information from ministers of the crown. But I do agree we must co-operate, all of us, in