

Supply—Privy Council

days, to see that answers are provided either by the minister or by the acting minister or by the parliamentary secretary. This willingness of the government to account for its stewardship and inform the opposition is a distinct advance over past practice.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North—

Some hon. Members: Winnipeg North Centre.

Mr. Drury: To me, he is not a man of the centre; perhaps that is my problem. In any case, he has drawn attention to the crux of the intellectual conflict which is going on here, namely, that the question period is regarded by some as political warfare and that rules which tend to make that warfare more orderly lessen its fun and people do not like that.

While this proposal may detract from the fun of the warfare, it must be recognized by anybody who is honest about it as constituting a step forward inasmuch as it provides for the public and for members of the opposition a more certain and more orderly way of providing information or giving an account of stewardship. I must say I am surprised it has not been so accepted by the opposition. One is driven to the conclusion that the only reason they have for opposing it is that this move will project the image of a government which is serious-minded, purposeful and coherent in connection with the transaction of the business of parliament, rather than engaging in fun and political warfare.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Harkness: Mr. Chairman, I must say I am somewhat surprised at the remarks which have just been made by the minister. He based his argument chiefly on the assumption that the system he proposes would provide more certain answers to hon. members' questions and lead to better order by guaranteeing replies to questions at specific times when ministers would be present in the house. I submit this is a complete illusion. It is exactly what has not happened. From this point of view the experiment has been a complete failure.

Yesterday, five of the ministers listed on the schedule, ministers who were supposed to be here, were not present. I wrote their names down at the time, intending to raise a question about it, but I did not get round to doing so owing to the direction which the question period took. At any rate, members of the opposition were obviously unable to

[Mr. Drury.]

address questions to those particular ministers.

Today for about half of the question period there were eight ministers present out of a total of some 28 in the cabinet. Later another minister came in, so there were nine. But throughout the entire question period fewer than a third of the members of the cabinet were present to answer questions. Questions to the Prime Minister in the absence of ministers responsible were answered in a flippant manner, words such as these: I hope the hon. member will be able to contain his curiosity until the minister is here on Tuesday next.

If this experiment was designed to make certain that members would know when they could expect to get answers from specific ministers, it is a complete failure. Ministers who were supposed to be here, according to the schedule, have failed to attend. And, of courses, others who were not on the schedule were also absent. So far this arrangement has served as a means by which ministers can evade to the greatest extent possible their responsibility to members of the House of Commons. This is a most serious matter.

● (3:00 p.m.)

According to our basic constitutional practice ministers are responsible to the House of Commons and are required to answer questions put by hon. members. In my view this experiment is an effort to place ministers in a situation in which they need no longer answer to members of the House of Commons—by absence for a good deal of the time or by the nature of the answer given on their behalf by whoever is supposed to be representing them, that questioners will just have to wait a few days for a reply. The whole trend is to erode the rights of parliament in this regard and weaken the principle that ministers are responsible to the House of Commons and are required to answer to members of that body. If this so-called experiment is continued we will have a very rapid erosion of one of the basic principles of our responsible, representative form of government. This is the most serious aspect of the matter.

The minister stated that members would be able to get answers at definite times. Can he give me any specific instances, during the two weeks that the new system has been in operation, where members have actually managed to get answers from the ministers concerned, at least in so far as the majority of the questions are concerned?