

Business of Supply

the estimates of the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's office were handled in the past. When we had the old rules in the Pearson administration, the estimates were handled by my predecessors in office, the presidents of the privy council.

Mr. Lamontagne, now Senator Lamontagne, handled them in December, 1963. Mr. McIlraith handled them in April, 1964. Mr. Favreau handled them in February, 1966, and in June, 1966. In 1967, it was the president of the treasury board who handled the estimates. Therefore, there is nothing extraordinary about this procedure. Indeed, I sometimes wonder why the issue is being raised now when it was not raised in 1968 when my colleague, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, was president of the privy council and handled the estimates.

Mr. Stanfield: We knew there was no use asking him anything.

Mr. Clark (Rocky Mountain): I take it from that recitation of past history that the acting prime minister does not intend to change this situation where we cannot get a minister before the committee and we cannot get a deputy minister before the committee. When the Prime Minister shows up, he talks for most of his time, usually irrelevantly, and then leaves. Is that the only kind of supervision the House of Commons is going to have, what the Acting Prime Minister delights in calling a responsible system, over the estimates and activities of a group which by definition co-ordinates the policy of the Government of Canada? Am I correct in understanding there is to be no change in that situation of secrecy and impossibility of direct access?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Chairman, I am still waiting for the questions. I have been sitting here patiently and I have listened to arguments that we are not responsible. I am sitting here prepared to take the responsibility. I would like to have the questions put to me.

Mr. Clark (Rocky Mountain): My only response is that I am waiting for an answer to a question I have put three times in quite specific terms. My impression is that the answer is there will be no change in the hiding away of the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's office relevant to questions about policy, and there will be no change in the situation where no responsible minister appears. I wish to ask the Acting Prime Minister whether the Privy Council office is now preparing any proposals on parliamentary reform. Where are those proposals? What are they? What kinds of reform do they anticipate? What is the procedure to bring them to this House of Commons before they come here in the form of a bill, or is that being left entirely to a group of civil servants who operate some distance from this House whose rules will be effected, without any ready access by this House to them?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Chairman, perhaps I should remind the hon. member that as President of the Privy Council and chairman of the House committee on procedure and organization, in so far as the rules of the House are concerned I do have some responsibility which I plan to discharge. I have received excellent advice from parliament, the hon. member for Peace River, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre and my parliamentary secretary—very

[Mr. Sharp.]

experienced men. I doubt very much whether officials of the Privy Council office have as much experience as we have, and certainly none of us would want them to bring in the reform of parliament.

It is true that from time to time I do consult with some of the people who have some responsibility to me, for example the secretary of the committee on legislation and House planning, which is one of the committees I happen to chair in the cabinet. I ask his advice. He is an experienced man who has been around for a long time. He is a distinguished lawyer and I find his advice extremely helpful. But I assure you, Mr. Chairman, that as President of the Privy Council I take responsibility in matters concerning the reform of parliament.

● (1720)

The Deputy Chairman: I regret to interrupt the hon. gentleman, but his time has expired. Before calling upon the hon. member for St. Paul's, I should like to announce the subjects of the adjournment debate this evening: the hon. member for Vancouver South—Supply and Services; the hon. member for Northwest Territories—Indian Affairs; the hon. member for Carleton-Charlotte—Transport.

Mr. Roberts: Mr. Chairman, I have been somewhat puzzled by the debate so far, and a little disappointed.

An hon. Member: My heart bleeds for you.

Mr. Roberts: Hon. members on the other side are often disappointing, and I am disappointed with their performance today. I am disappointed because I have been reading some of the articles which have been published by the hon. member for Rocky Mountain. I believe, like him, that there are important questions which should be discussed in some detail concerning the role of the Prime Minister's office and of the Privy Council office. It is important that the House should understand the function of these offices in the governmental process and their relation to this House.

I was surprised, therefore, when the hon. member went off on a tangent. He complained, for example, that the Prime Minister was only here for an hour every day for questioning. Only an hour! If one goes to Great Britain one finds that the members of the British House are extraordinarily pleased when the prime minister comes into the chamber to answer questions twice a week for about 15 minutes. If one talks to U.S. congressmen or senators, as I had the pleasure of doing a few weeks ago, one finds they are astonished that the leader of the government should come into the House of Commons for an hour a day to respond to questions of which he has been given no notice. They find this difficult to believe. When they see it in operation they are even inclined to think that it is a show staged for their benefit. Nowhere in the world has a legislature more opportunity to question a leader of government than is the case here in Canada.

I was surprised, again, when the hon. member complained about the length of the Prime Minister's statement today. If the Prime Minister had come in with a statement lasting five minutes, or ten minutes, the very same member would be complaining that the Prime Minister