

the question examined by the Committee on Procedure and Organization.

Mr. Howie: Would the minister permit a question? Would he care to comment on the length of time some of the written questions remain on the order paper? If we could speed up answers to questions on the order paper it might help matters during the oral question period.

Mr. MacEachen: I have attempted to get answers as quickly as possible. Hon. members—and I am sure this is true in the case of the hon. member for Prince Edward-Hastings—understand how slowly at times government departments respond to the necessity of supplying information. Every Monday I try to sit down with my parliamentary secretary and review the progress we are making in answering questions. There is no desire to withhold information. Some questions require a lot of digging. Others are difficult, and have to be considered by a minister. But the main job is extracting information quickly from government departments. I do not say this in any political way today, but I have examined the record of the last parliament and productivity, in terms of answering questions, has been very high. Mind you, the number of questions set down on the order paper is increasing. The number of notices of motion for production of papers is increasing rapidly. If I may say so, part of the reason is the fact that Members of Parliament now have research staffs which, it seems to me, develop their imaginations by thinking up questions to put on the order paper. In order to get rapid answers it would be sound if we kept the number of questions on the order paper to the absolute minimum; then, I think we would get better results.

• (1610)

At some future time I hope to have the opportunity to talk about the very vexing problem of notices of motions for the production of papers. We want to give as much information as possible, but if you look at the order paper you will see there is really an enormous demand for information. The more economical we are in asking for information, the more rapidly the answers will be forthcoming. In addition to that, much of the information that is requested in questions on the order paper is a matter of public record in any event. It is available in government documents and publications, but if one pointed that out he would be accused of withholding information needed by Members of Parliament.

I believe there are a lot of things we could do to improve the process. In respect of starred questions, we ought to, and we are trying, get the answers out as quickly as possible. Many of the questions that are starred are obviously of a highly political nature. Many of them are not put on the order paper for the purpose of soliciting information. Despite his disclaimer, my friend the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) usually has all the information he needs before he asks a question, but he asks questions to score political points. In part, the purpose of the question period is to score political points, and I think we ought to understand that.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, may I very briefly say just two things. First, in respect of the discussion we have now had for more than the length

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of a question period, I trust that the government House leader will endeavour, perhaps by consultation with other House leaders and with Your Honour, to provide a term of reference that might be presented to the House very soon which would result in an early meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The other thing I should like to say relates to the inquiry by the hon. member for Malpeque (Mr. MacLean) concerning the business of the House. As the government House leader knows, there have been some discussions about the possibility of passing Order No. 20, which has to do with a reference to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, without debate. I think we might find that either now or tomorrow that would be the case and it could be passed without debate. If we could do it now, at least we would have accomplished something today.

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. MacLean: Mr. Speaker, I only rise to say that this is agreeable to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Speaker: Before seeking the concurrence of the House, I should like to make one brief comment. I thank hon. members for their very valuable and generous suggestion for the consideration of the Chair.

I think the point has been made, and this has become apparent during the discussion, that the problem to which reference has been made is not one for the Chair to solve. The Chair is here entirely and exclusively, to the extent this can be done, to see that the rules adopted by this House are respected. It is not for the Chair to change the rules, to either shorten or prolong the question period, change the provisions of Standing Order 43 or speed the returns to the House.

My duty, and this is the commission I have from hon. members, is to see that the rules adopted by the House are as nearly as possible respected, taking into account the mood of the House and the particular circumstances. If it is the intention of hon. members that changes or amendments should be made in the Standing Orders, this can be done by the House, normally after consideration by the Committee on Procedure and Organization. I will certainly offer my full co-operation to see that the committee meets early.

The suggestion was made during the discussion that the Speaker is either the Chairman or a member of that committee. This is not so, of course. I am very pleased that the Speaker is not a member of that committee because he escapes the criticism that might attend recommendations which are made to the House following the discussions and considerations of the committee. I feel that the other problems to which reference has been made should be considered at an early date by the committee. It is my opinion that the committee is very useful and has worked well and efficiently in past years. I think it can be helpful in the days and weeks ahead in solving some of the difficulties to which hon. members have alluded, and I can assure them once again of my wholehearted and enthusiastic co-operation.