

Supply—Privy Council

useful advice from the hon. member for Saint John-Lancaster.

Mr. Hees: You had better stick to the straight line. You are not funny.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): I think it is obvious that in our parliamentary system we must make some adjustment because of the fact that there is now more business to be dealt with and the matters to be dealt with are of increasing complexity. I think it is important to recognize that the parliamentary institution which we have inherited has grown and evolved over the years. It will continue to evolve and grow but we hope to find on the other side of the house a greater receptiveness to this kind of parliamentary change instead of the negativism that would indicate that, because things have not been done this way in the past, no changes should be made.

● (12:30 p.m.)

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Chairman, now that this subject has been opened again I should like to make a few comments. I agree with the President of the Privy Council that it would be ridiculous to insist that every minister be in his place in the house every day of the session. There are people like the Secretary of State for External Affairs who occasionally have to be away for a day at a time and sometimes for a week at a time. In fact, this is true of all the ministers of the cabinet. There are times when their absence is imperative either because of an important engagement in some other part of the country or elsewhere or because of illness. We recognize the fact that to have 100 per cent attendance on the part of cabinet members every day is impossible.

What we think complicates the situation is that the Prime Minister, on top of these absences that take place naturally, has imposed what seems to be a requirement or an order that on certain days certain ministers shall stay out of the house, whether or not they have to be somewhere else. We have already experienced the situation where ministers, according to the roster, are not supposed to be here for the question period and they come in afterwards. I do not know where the President of the Privy Council was this morning. He was not here during the question period but he came in afterwards.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): What would you say if I told you I was at a cabinet committee meeting?

[Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale).]

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Is that the answer for the 18 or so ministers who were absent this morning? Were they all at the same cabinet meeting?

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Mr. Chairman, in answer to the hon. member's observation perhaps I should state that while I am not at liberty to say who was at the committee meeting there was a cabinet committee meeting this morning and a substantial number of my colleagues were at that meeting. I think it is appropriate that we have such meetings.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I hope the President of the Privy Council will not have his knuckles rapped for having made a cabinet leak, but I can tell him that I regard this as a legitimate reason for a minister being absent. It is legitimate for ministers to be absent when some emergency arises and a cabinet committee meeting takes place. It is precisely because there are so many of these legitimate reasons—appointments at the United Nations and throughout the country, and cabinet meetings, or because of illness—that I think it is unfair to the house to say that over and above these there are certain days on which certain ministers will not be here because of the roster.

The second comment I should like to make is this. The Prime Minister assured us when he announced this system in the first place that it was not his intention to impose upon us a notice requirement any more stringent than now prevails. Of course, there is no notice requirement at all. At any rate, this was the assurance. Later on when this issue became a rather warm one we were assured again there would always be someone in the house for each department. We were assured that the minister, the acting minister or the parliamentary secretary would be here to answer questions. Failing that we were told the Prime Minister would be here. In this way we could get an answer of sorts on any day.

This situation seems to have changed. This morning the Prime Minister told one or two members to be here on Tuesday or Wednesday to ask their questions at that time. In other words, we are being shoehorned into a system under which we must ask questions about certain departments on certain days whether or not there is an emergency.

The whole effect of this is a weakening of the question period, making it less important and cooling it off. I think this is bad for parliament. Sometimes we do not get as much