

THE SENATE

Monday, February 12, 1951

The Senate met at 8 p.m., the Speaker in the Chair.

Prayers and routine proceedings.

FINANCE COMMITTEE

CONCURRENCE IN REPORT

Hon. T. A. Crerar presented and moved concurrence in the first report of the Standing Committee on Finance.

The report was read by the Clerk Assistant as follows:

Your committee recommend that their quorum be reduced to nine members.

Hon. Mr. Reid: Honourable senators, as a member of this committee, may I ask when the committee met? No notice of the meeting was given to me.

Hon. Mr. Robertson: The usual procedure is to call a general meeting for organization purposes. All senators who are named by the Committee of Selection attend this meeting and elect the chairmen of all standing committees except the Committee on Divorce, which elects its own chairman. Meetings of the individual committees are not called at the organization stage. However, this is a young institution, and it may be possible to make changes.

The motion was agreed to.

THE SENATE AND ITS WORK

MOTION

Hon. Wishart McL. Robertson moved:

That a Special Committee of the Senate be appointed to inquire into, and report upon, whatever action in its opinion may be necessary or expedient to enable the Senate to make its maximum contribution to the welfare of the Canadian people.

He said: Honourable senators, one day shortly after I was appointed to the position of leader of the government in the Senate, I was forced to admit to the house, as I have often had to do since, that there was no business before us on the order paper. I distinctly remember that an honourable senator sitting opposite—if I remember correctly, the late Senator Ballantyne—asked me if I would not use my good offices with the government of the day to provide the Senate with more work, and he suggested specifically that more government business might be introduced in this house.

I was only too willing to comply with his request, which he presented in the courteous manner characteristic of him.

At the first opportunity I sought an interview with the late Mr. Mackenzie King, who was then Prime Minister. I explained my problem, and he at once agreed to place the matter before his colleagues. Subsequently he did so. I was on the point of leaving when he asked me to sit down, and in an intimate and delightful conversation—such as many honourable senators no doubt recollect with pleasure—he proceeded to discuss with me the question of the Senate and its functions. He took me back over the years and mentioned the discussions which had taken place about the Senate since confederation. He told me about different times when he and others had made proposals for Senate reform, that books had been written on the subject and, as I understood it, that some elections had been partly fought over this question. He said that inevitably any suggestion of Senate reform arises to a certain extent from the attitude of the government of the day, which perhaps has had a disagreement with the Senate, and thinks that something should be done about it. He said that over the years such differences of opinion had been the cause of change in second houses in various countries. The Prime Minister told me: "I have always had it in mind to do something about the Senate before I cease to be Prime Minister, but there are so many things to be done from one day to another that it is difficult for me to concentrate on this question. I think action should be taken at a time when the relations between the two houses are happy ones, because then the change could be made under very much better circumstances. After all, any proposal that the government would make would have to be concurred in by the Senate." He said: "My own view, for what it is worth, is that the Senate itself should give consideration to this problem." Then he turned to me and suggested that I, having just assumed the responsibility of leader of this house, at his hand, should take the initiative. He went on to say that he could give no undertaking; but that if in due course the Senate in its wisdom prepared proposals which appealed to him as being practical, and which would be looked upon favourably by the country, he would submit them to his colleagues for consideration.

Honourable senators, needless to say I was very much impressed by that conversation. I can particularly recall Mr. King speaking about the growing complexity of modern government, and how difficult it was for parliament to keep abreast of it all. He said it was a matter of regret that the Senate, which was