

House of Commons Act

This is a matter that could be looked into. I do not think it is one that can be covered under the rules. It is really a question of interpretation by the government. If the government wants to improve the situation a great deal, let it interpret section 18 in the way it could readily be interpreted, in which case many of the problems would be eliminated.

Mr. D. Gordon Blair (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I intend to speak only briefly in this debate; perhaps, in view of what the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) said, in self-defence. I am putting forward as an important consideration the fact that the Committee on Organization and Procedure is likely to have other matters referred to it. I make that comment only facetiously.

The question raised by the bill proposed by the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard) is an important one. There are many rules, practices and procedures in this House that are old: many of them could, with propriety, be described as archaic. I am not of the opinion that "archaic" could apply absolutely to the function performed by the Commissioners of Internal Economy, but I am of the opinion that the role that the commissioners perform is one that appears largely to have been dictated by parliamentary history.

Since we made great progress in this chamber during the last session of Parliament in regard to reforming rules, streamlining procedures and giving the ordinary members of Parliament a greater opportunity to participate in the affairs of the House, I do not think there is any reason why we should not look at the comments that have been made concerning a particular aspect of our procedure.

• (5:50 p.m.)

I am impressed by the statements made by the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (Mr. Allmand) and the hon. member for Edmonton West. Their statements indicate that there are really quite serious legal and operational problems involved in the proposal which has been made by the hon. member for Skeena. Indeed, if I understood the argument of the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce correctly, the bill which has been proposed by the hon. member for Skeena would only partially cover the situation and perhaps leave us in a position where we would be worse off than we are at the present time. However, as always in our country, whenever change is proposed and progress is advocated there appears to be an obscure clause in our constitution which has to be taken into account.

I think we should be prepared at the appropriate time to give consideration to this proposal because of the responsibilities we have to ourselves as members of this House and also to the very large group of people who work for the House of Commons. I believe that greater participation by ordinary members of the House in the affairs of the House might produce benefits for us all.

I refer to *Votes and Proceedings* for April 22, 1969, when the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, of which I am the chairman, presented its first report. This report recommended among other things the provision of more space, personnel and facilities for the proper operation of the committees branch. It is a matter of common knowledge that the facilities and space available to the committees branch is far from adequate for its present function, with the result that the staff perform under very unsatisfactory conditions. Yet at this stage, ten months later, no action has been taken on this report.

We can think of many things that might be done to improve the physical position of members of the House. I do not intend to open or embark upon a discussion of them during these few remarks. I believe we should have regard to the position of the staff of the House, which is very large—approximating 2,000, if I am not mistaken. Perhaps I am exaggerating; it might be more like 1,500.

The purpose of the bill proposed by the hon. member for Skeena is to separate the House and its staff rather more from the ordinary structures of government. I think one of the problems of the staff of the House of Commons is that in many cases it is not treated in the same way as other public servants. I refer to difficulties and delays in obtaining salary increases and also the fact that House of Commons employees are not permitted to organize as are other members of the public service. I think that any consideration of the financial control of the House would have to take into account the problems of the staff and their relationship to other elements of the public service.

In my opinion the hon. member for Skeena has made a notable contribution in raising this matter for our consideration. I also express the hope that the Committee on Procedure and Organization, which appears likely to be faced with a full schedule of problems not much later in the life of this session, will not have to consider it this year.