

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, November 27, 1974

The House met at 2 p.m.

[English]

PRIVILEGE

MR. STEVENS—OBJECTION TO FACT THAT STANDING COMMITTEE NOT YET CONVENED TO STUDY SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (B)

Mr. Sinclair Stevens (York-Simcoe): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege that concerns not only the privileges of all members of this House but the basic and fundamental privilege of the House to grant or to refuse supply. Obviously, if that right is taken away, this House does not exist. It is not so obvious that this House does not exist, except in shadow form, when the right to grant or to refuse supply is emasculated through abuse of the rules of the House and the contempt of ministers of the Crown for the law of parliament.

● (1410)

On Friday last, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Chrétien) tabled Supplementary Estimates (B). These supplementary estimates petitioned this House to provide the government with the sum of \$1.75 billion to cover 49 items of expenditure. The Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates is charged by this House with the duty of considering these estimates and reporting them back to the House either granted in full, reduced, or refused.

The steering committee of the miscellaneous estimates committee met on Monday evening, set priorities within a very short time-frame and said they would like to hear ministers with respect to certain estimates. We asked to hear the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Macdonald), the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan), the Minister of Transport (Mr. Marchand), the Solicitor General (Mr. Allmand), the Minister of State for Urban Affairs (Mr. Danson), the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner), the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce (Mr. Gillespie), the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde), and from certain other departments.

The fact is that so far, no meetings have been arranged. In spite of the fact that \$1.75 billion is being asked for—which is more than the total budget of most provinces in this country—we are asked to consider 49 items in, now, only ten meetings at most. I raise this matter because I believe it is unfortunate that this procedure is being followed. For example, instead of referring the estimates only to the miscellaneous estimates committee, they should have been referred to the other relevant committees. I suggest that there must be a better way of treating this kind of expenditure.

In the result, the President of the Treasury Board abused the spirit of one of the basic rules of this House by tabling these supplementary estimates within a time-frame which effectively frustrated the order to this House

to consider—I emphasize the word “consider”—this request for \$1.75 billion of public moneys. Several ministers of the Crown have further frustrated that order by refusing to fit themselves within the time-frame that was suggested by the steering committee on miscellaneous estimates. As members of the committee, we are required, by the action of the President of the Treasury Board, to do the impossible.

Therefore, if it is acceptable to Your Honour, I move, seconded by the hon. member for Huron-Middlesex (Mr. McKinley):

That the subject matter of this question of privilege be referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization.

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Mr. Speaker, I should like to speak very briefly on this question of privilege. I submit to Your Honour that since the present rules of the House under which we are operating were accepted, government spending has more than doubled. I submit it is an abuse of Standing Order 58(15), under which the House deals with supplementary estimates, for the government to rely more and more on the Standing Order to get its supply through this House. In my humble submission, the Standing Order was never intended to be used to the extent it has been used by this government. I humbly submit it was never intended that the miscellaneous estimates committee should be charged with the responsibility of considering, within the very narrow time-frame prescribed by the Standing Order, estimates to the extent of \$1.75 billion.

I submit to Your Honour that this is clearly an abuse of the rules of the House. I hope Your Honour will treat the motion of the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens) with consideration and will have this matter referred to the standing committee, where it can properly be considered.

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (President of Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, you will have to rule whether this is a question of privilege. I rise only to say that I believe the rules of the House demand a very fundamental revision and I would be quite happy to see this, among other questions, discussed in the committee.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. If there are no further contributions to the question of privilege, I might indicate that the hon. member was good enough to give the Chair notice of his intention to raise this question of privilege. It seems to me that the argument the hon. member has presented in support of his prima facie question of privilege, supported by the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath), raises what is in fact a very important subject and, therefore, a very important grievance in respect of the manner in which this substantial sum of money for proposed government expenditure will be examined by this House.