

Auditor General

Second, we must re-examine the committee process radically. We must reduce the number of committees and the number of people serving on those committees. Right now, to make the committee system work we should have approximately 150 members. We actually have about 65 members from both sides of the House who make the committee system operate. We might as well accept that. We must accept the fact that members of parliament come down here on their own volition. They write their own job description. For some of them committees are a joy; for some they are a drag. Let us face up to this fact. Let us reduce the number of committees and the number of people on them.

We must examine the way chairmen of committees are elected. I would like to see more chairmen elected from the other side. I think this is a desirable reform so that members from all sides of the House can take their full responsibilities in holding offices in the House of Commons. I believe we should also re-examine the way in which we deal with estimates in the standing committees. We must provide more opportunity for the members to focus in on these.

I believe one of the major obstacles to the committees doing a good job on estimates is the fact that there are too many members on the committees. Because of the unreasonably high quorum requirements, there are members who are interested in some committees who cannot get in the amount of time they need in order to do an appropriate job. That means we must cut down on the size and on the numbers, and give them more time.

What the government should be thinking of doing is spreading out the time during which members can carry out an examination of the departmental picture over the full year, and not just have it concentrated in the period between March and the end of May. It would be more desirable if this were spread out over the whole of the year. What we could do is set up four of five departments in the first term, four or five in the second term and four or five in the third term. In this way we would not have the tremendous crunch of committees that now takes place when we consider all our estimates at the same time as the legislative program starts to move through the House of Commons. So, from the period beginning the end of February until the end of May the committees are totally overburdened.

The amount of sitting time committees can get in any given two-week period is about five slots of about an hour and one-half each. This simply is not enough time. We could organize our system better if we gave up the idea that in fact members of parliament are interested in the actual spending, the real dollar figures. What we have to do is see that members are interested in the departmental picture, and design a system where they can have the annual reports, the estimate figures, and whatever other information they require at their fingertips. In this way there would be more time to do the job. This means that many of the functions members now have in respect of the estimates and the way in which committees operate will have to be changed. I think that if we change them and acknowledge what really goes on, we can make reforms that would be worth while.

[Mr. Reid.]

Another matter I think we should look at with great seriousness is the concept of members of parliament and the roles they play in their constituencies as an important part of the procedure of feed-back for government. Members of parliament complain bitterly that when they speak in the House no one listens to them, and that when they ask questions in a committee no one pays attention. My experience on this side is that indeed members of parliament are listened to in the committees and in the House of Commons by the bureaucrats, the ministers, and the people who assist the cabinet in making decisions.

The problem is that in many cases the members are not sufficiently well prepared in order to make the cases they want to make. However, they are the most valuable feed-back system in many cases the ministers and the bureaucrats have in respect of the way in which their programs are actually operating in the constituencies. It seems to me that there really should be some forum, or some way in which members can organize and provide information to ministers and departments in a better manner than is now done through the medium of the estimates.

In many cases I believe there is a failure on the part of the members to actually go out, co-operate, and do the sort of thing the hon. member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather) mentioned. I feel there are opportunities for us to make substantial changes in the way this House operates, and the sooner we do it the better for all of us.

Mr. Tom Cossitt (Leeds): Mr. Speaker, when I first came to the House I suppose like all newcomers I had certain preconceptions of what was going on here. Perhaps the strongest of these was the belief that the executive arm of government was growing at an alarming rate to the point where we were moving in the direction of a presidential system and rapidly away from our traditional parliamentary system of government. After three years I have seen nothing to weaken this conception, and I have seen countless things to strengthen it.

It seems to me a delusion to believe that parliament is the completely effective governing body in Canada. While parliament should be supreme, its authority has been whittled down and carved up by a government that has little respect for the parliamentary process. The tone was set some years ago when the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) made his infamous remark that opposition members of parliament were nothing more than a bunch of nobodies. This belief has been carried right on through the entire apparatus of government to a point where parliament has been treated with disdain.

Executive power has been increased with fantastic speed. The expenditure of public money has risen with little restraint to levels undoubtedly believed impossible just a few short years ago. I doubt if even the cabinet has much control over this situation. We are being governed primarily from decisions in the Prime Minister's office, and parliament is being tolerated as an unfortunate constitutional nuisance.

A few days ago the Prime Minister came before the House to be questioned on the estimates of the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's offices. Supposedly he had come here to allow parliament to examine and question the gigantic increases in executive power in Canada,