

Dollar Items

on hon. members not to indulge in that sort of thing, and I also call on the media to cease its attempt to make this place a failure.

I repeat what I said a moment ago because I think it is the main thing I want to say. Parliament is not a failure; parliament is not irrelevant to the needs of Canada. What is wrong here is that the government is not sensitive to what we need; the government is not bringing in legislation to deal with the problems that face this country. If the government comes to its senses and brings in that kind of legislation, we will find that parliament is as great an institution as it has always been and as, I believe, it always will be.

Mr. Walter Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I would like to say, first of all, that I was surprised, quite frankly, by the opening remarks of the hon. member for Eglinton (Mr. Sharp) because, first, I believe that he has a feel for this place and that his true feelings for this place were not those which he expressed in his opening remarks; and, second, that a person who has had his years of experience in the government, his seniority in the public service, a person who unfortunately has never seen the other side of the coin from the point of view of the operations of the House of Commons—and it is his good fortune that he has always managed to sit on the government side—and a person who has dealt with estimates, should take the view that the matter of \$1 items, whether as a point of order, as it was dealt with yesterday, to decide whether or not the matter can be allowed to stand within a bill because of the standing orders of the House or as a matter of principle is not substantive and does not go to the root of our parliamentary system.

I have not been here for a long time and I do not claim to have the parliamentary experience of the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) or the hon. member for Eglinton, but all this motion says is that regardless of Mr. Speaker's ruling today, or whenever it should come, this practice of \$1 items in principle is a tainted practice which should not be pursued by any government, even this government which is in itself a tainted government, except in an emergency when there is no other way in which this matter could be brought forward, and then only if it falls within the standing orders.

The fact is that for the former president of the privy council, former minister of finance and former deputy minister of industry, trade and commerce—

Mr. Sharp: And former minister of industry, trade and commerce.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton):—and, as the hon. member says, former minister of industry, trade and commerce, to say that this is not a matter of substance for us to discuss is—I think that upon reflection he will agree—one of the most unwise remarks that he has ever made in an otherwise distinguished career. I regret that he said it. For the hon. member to say that the hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski), as sponsor of the motion, and I, as opposition House leader

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

and seconder of the motion, are embarrassing Mr. Speaker with this matter is quite beyond my comprehension.

I do not want this debate to become too partisan—I really do not—but if any group has embarrassed Mr. Speaker and has embarrassed parliament as well as the traditions of this place, it is this government in doing what it did in terms of \$1 items, because they did it in face of the precedents of 1971 and 1973 at which time it was clearly stated that this practice is at least questionable and that in those circumstances it should not have been adopted.

This debate is far from superfluous. The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre paid an eloquent tribute to parliament which should have come from the mouth of the former government House leader—but it did not. He chose in this debate to join the ranks of those who for short-term partisan purposes would denigrate parliament. There is not one of us who believes his job is irrelevant, whether he backs the government or whether he sits in the opposition. The great question is: Where is parliament going? As I said, I have not been here as long as the hon. member for Eglinton, but a long time ago I used to sit daily in the gallery as a student and watch the late Brooke Claxton, Jimmy Gardiner, C. D. Howe, Douglas Abbott and other members of the government come into the House and make themselves available to answer questions with respect to their estimates—which, after all, are the charts of government expenditures and programs—from ordinary members of parliament, not just members of the opposition.

Do we have an opportunity to do that now in this parliament? Does anyone honestly believe that in terms of the estimates, despite the blandishments set forth by the hon. member for Eglinton, the former government House leader, the average backbencher or frontbencher who is not a member of the executive has an opportunity to examine estimates? Is that honestly believed? Of course not.

● (1620)

Does our committee system work, in terms of estimates? There have been chronicles written about it and many have spoken about it—and the answer is “no”. That is a fact. Nobody denies the usefulness of our committees in terms of legislative items. The system has worked well, but anyone who has looked at this parliament objectively and who has written about it, and even those who have not looked at it objectively and have written and spoken about it, has said that in terms of the examination of estimates—the only thing by which we know what a government intends to do, how it intends to do it, why it intends to do it, how much it is going to cost, and what the effect of it will be—the use of the present standing committee system, coupled with the automatic end to the consideration of estimates, has effectively removed from backbenchers and frontbenchers who are not members of the government the right to know. That is a parliamentary fact which is unassailable and, equally, regrettable.

That process which has continued through successive rule changes in this House is not set aside, changed, watered-down or made less relevant because a government decides, in addi-