

Business of Supply

Here again I must differ in opinion with the hon. member. Sometimes I wonder what is the point in having all federal ministers in the House every afternoon of the week when several are never asked any question during the oral question period.

We certainly wish to have a Cabinet composed of ministers able to assume their duties. We should once more rationalize our procedures at that level and make sure that when those ministers will be in this House we shall have questions to ask them. As I said, we certainly have some lessons to learn from the question periods in the British legislature. Every member of the Procedure and organization committee who visited Westminster in January could realize that the questions asked were becoming more and more relevant and knowledgeable as during an oral question period, the questions were put only to one or two ministers. And in fact, the system seemed to function very well there even though their population is much larger than ours and obviously their problems are quantitatively if not qualitatively more numerous than ours.

This afternoon we also discussed the federal-provincial relations and in that respect, I think that the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) raised a very important point in our system. And this is one of the reasons why I am so pleased to see in the estimates that the government tries to improve the whole situation concerning the federal-provincial relations. For some parties in this House, those relations consists only of presenting in this House the views of the provinces. Some do not stop asking the government why it does not agree to the view of such or such provincial minister. And eventually we forget the role of Canada's Parliament, the role of the national parties, we forget that national interest must override local interest.

This is why I am so pleased to see that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) give so much importance to the whole area of federal-provincial relations particularly by appointing a senior official who is held in high respect by everyone in our country to take charge of the Secretariat for federal-provincial relationship of the Private Council Office.

Mr. Chairman, this more or less sums up what I wanted to say tonight. I would like to conclude by asking the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp) a question relating to one of the items of the estimates of the Privy Council Office and to the management, or rather to the funds which were made available to the Public Research Institute established by the government during the last Parliament.

Hon. members will remember that this organization was set up following studies undertaken at the request of the government and carried out by a man who later became the adviser of the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield), and it is definitely an organization from which a lot is expected. I wonder whether the President of the Privy Council could tell us when we can expect that institute to really start its operations and start issuing the kind of reports and work which are expected from it, and which the government had in mind when they accepted the implementation of the Ritchie report.

[English]

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Chairman, I understand the question relates to the Institute for Research on Public Policy. This institute had as its first director Mr. Ritchie, who is now in the office of the Leader of the Opposition. It is getting under way now. It has recruited some staff and its headquarters are in Montreal. It is hoped it will get under way with some project in the field of research and public policy in the next few months. I should perhaps remind the House that the institute now has fairly large sums of money at its disposal as a result of contributions from various companies, and also from the governments of Ontario and Quebec. It has had a total fund available from non-federal sources of \$1,245,000. The government has undertaken to match the contributions that are made over the next seven years up to a total of \$10 million.

I think the short answer is that this institution, which we think will make a useful contribution in advice to all of us in parliament, including the government, will shortly be producing some papers and some studies.

Mr. Baldwin: I understand that Mr. Ritchie did not have a strong enough stomach to stay that close to the Privy Council office.

• (2020)

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Chairman, briefly because of the time constraint due to the Prime Minister's penchant for filibustering his own estimates I wish to direct questions about the office and duties of the Prime Minister's principal secretary to the government House leader. I remind him that the office is powerful and prestigious. One of the predecessors of the principal secretary—I mean the present Minister of National Health and Welfare—said on page 27 of a lengthy paper he presented on September 8, 1971, entitled, "The Changing Role of the Prime Minister's Office":

The principal secretary is the Prime Minister's chief of staff and main personal political adviser... he provides the Prime Minister with advice on a variety of policy matters and fulfils any assignment that the Prime Minister decides to give him.

He went on to say:

... with the approval of the Prime Minister, he may attend any cabinet committee meeting.

That approval, I suggest, gives him a unique opportunity to gain access to confidential and important information, and gives him powers and prerogatives equal to and sometimes greater than those enjoyed by cabinet ministers.

I wish to ask the Acting Prime Minister some questions. If he cannot answer tonight, perhaps he will take them as notice and answer another time. First I wish to ask a question concerning the guidelines concerning conflict of interest as set out by the Prime Minister, I believe on December 18, 1973.

What attempts did the Prime Minister make to ascertain whether Mr. Austin met the criteria set out in the statement of guidelines for public servants who are order in council appointees? Was any investigation carried out by the Prime Minister or anyone on his behalf? If so, by whom was this done? Also, did the Prime Minister cause his principal secretary to take an oath under the Oaths of Allegiance Act, or any other statute or regulation, which