

Mr. Ross Whicher (Bruce): Mr. Speaker, may I respectfully point out that at 3.30 p.m. this afternoon the Committee on Finance, Trade and Economic Affairs is also meeting. However, this meeting is taking place because of the absolute insistence of the Conservative members that it do so.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: You can never tell from which corner your support will come.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I notice that the hon. member for St. John's East seeks the floor. He has already spoken on the point of order. I wonder whether he wishes to speak for a second time on that point.

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Speaker, I really wanted to respond to the request of the Government House Leader to facilitate the business of the House and resolve this problem which has arisen, because the committee of the whole is to sit while standing committees are scheduled to sit. I suggest to the Government House Leader that the meetings of the standing committees of the House ought to be cancelled or postponed while this House sits in committee of the whole.

Mr. Woolliams: I support that suggestion.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for St. John's East and other hon. members who have taken part in the debate on the point raised have drawn to the attention of the Chair and of the House that there is a difficulty today in that three or more important committees are to sit at the same time as the House, is sitting in committee of the whole. Hon. members no doubt realize that the House has been sitting in committee of the whole over many years and that, before the new rules were adopted, from session to session perhaps as much as two thirds of the time of the House of Commons was spent in considering matters in the committee of the whole. Even in those days, I am sure that standing committees sat at the same time as the House sat in committee of the whole.

An hon. Member: Not many committees sat.

Mr. Speaker: I may be wrong; I have simply been giving my impression. I am under the impression that we spent most of our time during each session in committee of the whole. Sometimes we spent week after week in committee of the whole. Some of the standing committees of the House must have sat during those debates. I may be wrong; I have nothing before me to confirm that impression which I am conveying to the House but that is my impression.

It is obvious that, according to our Standing Orders, and I think that the hon. member for St. John's East will be the first one to recognize this, what is being proposed this afternoon is permitted. The rules permit the House to sit in committee of the whole and, at the same time, two, three or more standing committees may sit in competition with the House. The President of the Privy Council has made the point that he agrees with the objection raised by hon. members from opposition parties

Business of the House

that, really, the work of this House should be concentrated in this Chamber. This is where the accent ought to be and this is where most of the action should be.

An hon. Member: Then, we ought to change the rules.

Mr. Speaker: By permitting so many committees to sit at the same time in competition with the House, and in competition with the committee of the whole, we are complicating our work. In many ways we are weakening, I might say, or diluting the significance of the work which is being done or which ought to be done in this chamber. Although that grievance or complaint might be well founded, the Speaker can do very little about it. The hon. member will recognize that it is the duty of the Chair to see that the Standing Orders are observed. The Standing Orders make it possible for such committees to sit at the same time as the House of Commons sits in committee of the whole. I might suggest that an effort could well be made by the House Leaders to try to arrange the business in some other way so that conflicts such as we are experiencing today will not arise. This having been said I must, from a strictly procedural point, rule that there is nothing the Chair can do to rectify the situation about which hon. members have complained.

Mr. W. B. Nesbitt (Oxford): Mr. Speaker, I had been trying to catch your eye and was not recognized before you made your ruling. Before the introduction of the new rules, most legislation was considered in this chamber and when we reached the committee of the whole stage, bills were considered in committee of the whole. It was implied when the new rules were being instituted, and this is a matter of record, that various pieces of legislation were to be referred from this House to the standing committees in order that the passage of those pieces of legislation might be expedited. It was implied that the purpose of those various committees was to consider legislation. Hon. members of this House often serve, at their own request, on one standing committee or on another, and it was felt that it would be quite possible for several pieces of legislation to go through the committee stage at one time. Legislation would be considered in committees sitting elsewhere than this chamber.

With respect, I do not think it was envisaged at the time that the anomalous situation would arise that we see today. We did not expect that two or three very important pieces of legislation would require the specialized attention of committees of this House while, at the same time, a piece of legislation affecting the whole future organization of this House and of the administration was being considered. That situation places members in a very awkward position. The question is whether members should be considering pieces of legislation which, by general agreement, may be considered in committees outside the House at the same time as the House in committee of the whole is considering a bill that affects the methods and procedures to be used in respect of future legislation.

I can understand why the Government House Leader is very anxious for the House to put this piece of legislation through, even if a number of hon. members are engaged elsewhere. If it goes through quickly, the government