

*Financial Administration Act*

know he will want to make a contribution to this debate, as he always does.

I was referring to the role of standing committees, the lack of collegiality and the attitude of the government toward these standing committees. Nowhere is this more apparent than in respect of our examination of estimates. What an absolute farce that is, Mr. Speaker.

We refer the estimates of the Government of Canada, some \$45 billion of public expenditure, to the standing committees where they are supposed to receive examination by members of this House, yet there is not one of those standing committees which functions with a quorum. Indeed, my friend, the hon. member for South Shore informs me that the Standing Committee on Fisheries yesterday could not even meet because it could not get enough members there to hear evidence.

When I say it could not get enough members to hear evidence I have in mind another illegal practice that has crept into this House whereby standing committees function without a quorum. We have adopted the practice whereby standing committees of the House can hear evidence if five members are present, including members of the two major parties. Committees sit with five members present and hear evidence, but they cannot do anything such as passing motions, moving amendments, or raising points of order.

Yesterday when the Standing Committee on Fisheries was to meet to examine the estimates of the fisheries service of the Department of the Environment it could not continue because it could not get even five members present. Under the rules adopted by this government in 1968, through the invocation of closure these standing committees are deemed to have reported the estimates back to the House by midnight as of the end of May. There is not a year that goes by when there is not at least one, sometimes two, and often three, departments of government which never even have this cursory examination of their estimates under this inadequate committee system. Even those departments that do go through the motions of appearing before standing committees with their estimates know that all they have to do is hang in there, because their estimates will be passed in any event and there is nothing the committee members can do about it.

This is why I believe, as I have already indicated, that for the new office of comptroller general to be effective there must be a fundamental change in the rules of this House, and a fundamental change in the committee structure and the procedure for examining estimates, as well as a change in the form of the estimates, as our amendment that was voted down would indicate. Unless there is this basic and fundamental change in the committee structure and in the form of the estimates, and in how the estimates are examined and reported back to the House, the comptroller general will find himself with the same degree of frustration the Auditor General has year after year when he reports to the Public Accounts Committee that spending is out of control and he can do nothing about it.

It has to be repeated again and again and again that this House has lost control of public spending and the government

[Mr. McGrath.]

is no longer accountable to parliament for this spending. There is no accountability and there is no control. We in this House have lost the ancient and traditional parliamentary privilege of withholding supply.

These changes to the rules were invoked by closure. The former auditor general, and this has to be said again and again until the message gets through, identified the change in the rules of this House in 1968 with the take-off in government spending. Let us just look at what has happened. When we lost the committee of supply in this House in respect of estimates and the right to control them, government expenditure took off to the point that today, ten years later, the projected deficit of government equals almost the total budget of the government ten years ago. That is what has happened to us here. We have to restore parliamentary control and government accountability.

My friend, for whom I have the greatest esteem, looks at me and laughs, and he is one of the guilty ones. If there were this degree of control and accountability, I submit that the Minister of Employment and Immigration would not have taken \$1 million of public funds and given it to one of the government's friends in the advertising business to launch a nation-wide advertising campaign pointing out abuses of the unemployment insurance program. This is \$1 million that has been wasted via the government pork barrel. He could have achieved the same result with practically no cost to the government by merely inserting in each envelope to each unemployment insurance recipient a little card pointing out the regulations of the Unemployment Insurance Act, the consequences of circumventing those regulations, and the penalties for fraud. That would have been much simpler. With this government's penchant for spending public funds we had to have a \$1 million advertising account, which was not only a waste of money but was also an insult to the vast majority of unemployment insurance recipients who do not cheat.

That attitude prevails throughout the government structure, and that is why it is a matter of some considerable regret that the President of the Treasury Board did not even think it worth his while to be present in the House today for third reading of this bill for which he is responsible.

We have to change the rules of this House. If we do not, the people of Canada will lose what little regard they have left for this institution. It has been said that the advent of television in the House would make this institution more relevant. I was one who felt that way, but I am now coming to the view that television in this House is showing this place up for the irrelevancy it has become under this government, and that is a matter of some regret.

● (1502)

The government has nothing to fear from a strong opposition. Good opposition makes good government. You cannot have good opposition if you are going to tie the hands of the opposition and refuse them the right to hold the government accountable for the expenditures of public funds.