

Dollar Items

the ruling which, I expect, will take about one hour. I hope to return at about four o'clock this afternoon to make that ruling.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

ALLOTTED DAY S.O. 58—ONE DOLLAR ITEMS USED IN ESTIMATES

Mr. Don Mazankowski (Vegreville) moved:

That in the opinion of this House the government's use of dollar items further diminishes the proper control of the House of Commons over expenditure, and additionally, circumvents the right of the House to fully discuss the creation of new policies, programs and agencies.

He said: Mr. Speaker, the purpose of this motion is to highlight what appears to be a deliberate, calculated subversion of the parliamentary process through the abusive use of \$1 items in supplementary estimates, in this case supplementary estimates (D). I want to illustrate the inadequacy of the present form and content of the estimates and also to outline some of the questionable tactics which this government has seen fit to employ in the administration of public funds.

● (1510)

When we look at supplementary estimates (D) we find that these estimates expose a wide variety of practices which, when taken in totality, can only be seen as a systematic effort to obscure, to misrepresent and to hide the spending practices of this government. The information which is contained in the estimates—and this has been confirmed by known authorities, one being none other than the Auditor General—is quite inadequate, misleading and often contradictory of the data contained in the main estimates. Moreover, when we consider the constraints of the parliamentary process and the current parliamentary rules which govern the proceedings of this chamber and the proceedings of committees—the time limitation or the guillotine rule, so to speak—neither committees nor this House are given sufficient opportunity to question, to analyse thoroughly, to examine or, indeed, to challenge some of the spending practices of this government.

We are debating this issue at a time when it is, indeed, unfortunate that there prevails throughout the country some reservations about the institution of parliament and its ability to exercise control over the public purse. There is no question that there is in the country a serious decline of confidence in parliament, yet we have a government which contributes deliberately and in a dedicated way to usurping the role of parliament and chipping away its authority. Hon. members on this side of the House take very grave exception to that practice.

I believe that supplementary estimates D clearly demonstrate how and why it has become increasingly difficult for parliament to assert control over public expenditures. The President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) has stated his

[Mr. Speaker.]

concern about the lack of parliamentary control. Last week in the House he stated that he was not happy with the current use of \$1 items and suggested that this was a matter which fell within the aegis of parliamentary procedure; that it was really a procedural matter rather than one about which the government should concern itself.

I find that very strange, because when we read the Auditor General's report we find that many improvements could be made in the form and content of the estimates. The government has only to act and accept some of the recommendations which have been advanced. I find it strange, also, that the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen), a very distinguished parliamentarian for whom we all have high regard, spoke the other day in eloquent terms about the deep concern he has about the importance of preserving and, indeed, enhancing parliament and making it relevant to today's needs. I wonder, then, why he is party to the tactics this government uses systematically to undermine the authority of this chamber and the fundamental purpose for which this institution was established, namely, to debate legislative proposals and amendments thereto.

Why does this government refuse to act? Why does it refuse to accept some of the major recommendations of the Auditor General? One can only suggest that there are probably two reasons. Perhaps it is because attempts to improve the form and content of the estimates and the manner in which they are presented would reveal a degree of incompetence in the government to effectively plan and to allocate funds. On the other hand, it could be that this practice is an effective device for hiding unpopular or questionable expenditures. Whatever the reason, the methods being used with regard to supplementary estimates, particularly the abuse of \$1 items, to me highlights the fact that this government is interested in expediency and convenience and does not have much concern about the traditions and privileges of this institution.

We know that the Auditor General is very concerned and unhappy about the present set-up. He has made it very clear that he considers public funds to be, in effect, trust funds held on behalf of the people of Canada and that they should be treated as such. Until effective systems of budgetary control are introduced and followed, no one will know accurately whether funds are being spent for the purposes for which they were provided. Proper control over federal spending lies with the ability of parliament effectively to exercise that control, and parliament has not been able effectively to discharge that responsibility under the practices we currently employ—indeed, the practices we have employed since 1968. This cannot be achieved over-all without an informative plan for the accounting of funds entrusted to the government. The Auditor General stated in testimony before the Public Accounts Committee that accountability for expenditure of government funds starts with accountability to parliament. There is no question about that.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!