

*Supply—Privy Council*

● (2:50 p.m.)

**Mr. Baldwin:** The President of the Privy Council is a private member of this house as well as a member of the cabinet. I am speaking primarily about private members, meaning by that most of those who make up the membership of this house. The President of the Privy Council came here as a private member. Since then he has been given additional responsibilities which he may not at present be too happy about.

Under the provisions of the Canada Elections Act the majority of the members of this house need not represent the majority of the people of this country, and the government must bear in mind that today the opposition parties represent in total a majority of the people of Canada. There are private members on the government side as well as on the opposition side and it is of great benefit to all if the views of those representing Canadians can be put forward in the house. Members of the government need not travel all over Canada in order to gain an idea of what the people of Canada are thinking on any topic. The representatives of the people will inform the government and in that regard the individual members form the best pipe line the government has to public opinion.

**Mr. Drury:** Mr. Chairman, although my experience is limited and although I do not pretend to be an expert on the subject, I have listened with interest to the debate. I think we need to bring some perspective to bear on the problem. The house leader for the official opposition has suggested that the rules of the house are the property of the members of the house, and I do not think anyone questions that. It is for the house as a whole to determine what the rules shall be and how they shall be changed. In the present instance no change is to be made in our rules. The Prime Minister made a substantial and useful offer, the reception of which has not been universally happy. One reason for that has been indicated by the hon. member for Winnipeg North—

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** Winnipeg North Centre.

**Mr. Drury:** He said quite honestly that the particular period we are discussing, the question period, is devoted to political warfare. One cannot expect one side in any warfare to offer concessions gratuitously to the other side.

**Mr. Baldwin:** This is genocide, not warfare.

**Mr. Drury:** Well, if I am to be interrupted I would say the approach taken by the opposition would appear to be one of suicide rather than genocide.

The Prime Minister's offer was not couched in terms of the conduct of political warfare in the house. As has been indicated, there are a number of demands on the time and energy of the executive. One of those demands has been the customary, though unwritten one, that ministers attend in the house each day for a period varying from 30 minutes to an hour whether they are needed or not, whether anyone cares they are there or not. Though their presence may help the arithmetic of filled seats it is often the case that otherwise they carry out no useful function.

In order to make better use of the time of the executive, certain changes have been proposed by the Prime Minister. Under past practice, members of the opposition seeking information had to take their chance on the attendance of a minister. If he was absent they expected, and sometimes received, no answer at all; they were invited to wait until he returned, however long that might be. What the Prime Minister is proposing now is that on specific days of the week in relation to government departments, a definite number of departments should be answerable. Out of a total of five days, on three of those days, according to the choice of the opposition, the executive will organize itself in such a way as to produce answers to questions which are asked in relation to each department. This will be done either through the physical presence of the minister responsible for a department or through the adequate briefing of his parliamentary secretary or of an acting minister. Thus, on these three days, in respect of the departments designated, answers will be provided.

This has never been done before. This undertaking to answer, to give an accounting for stewardship at specific times, has never been offered before. Hitherto the opposition has had to depend on the physical presence of the minister concerned, governed by a number of external considerations, in order to secure information or answers. It was an adequate reply, in a minister's absence, to say he was away on public business. In the case of the Secretary of State for External Affairs, for instance, he might be absent for as long as 11 or 12 days at the United Nations General Assembly. For the first time the government has offered, on three of the total of five