

Business of the House

continue with it on Monday afternoon and Tuesday, if necessary.

As we are aware, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) has already indicated his intention of making a budget presentation on Monday evening. It is proposed that the budget debate will begin on Wednesday and will continue through the end of the week. In order to permit the delivery of the budget, I take this opportunity in accordance with Standing Order 60(2) to request you to designate an order of the day. I also suggest, in keeping with past practice, the House might make it an order that debate on whatever government business is before us at 5 p.m. on Monday be adjourned at that time so that the Minister of Finance may commence his speech when the House resumes at 8 p.m.

• (1600)

Mr. McGrath: A question to the government House leader. I feel the hon. member has a good deal of responsibility which he does not seem to wish to accept in relation to the discussion which took place in this chamber prior to the question directed by my hon. friend from Malpeque. I should like to ask the hon. member whether it is his intention, in the light of that discussion and the continuing concern of members of all parties who took part in the debate, to accede to the request of the hon. member for Egmont to call an organization committee meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization immediately. The committee has been struck, but obviously someone has to take the initiative in calling the committee together so that it can elect a chairman and get down to studying the serious questions raised by hon. members today.

Mr. MacEachen: In answer to this question, Mr. Speaker, perhaps I can say it is my intention at a very early date to initiate a meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization. That committee has a number of urgent matters to consider and I would certainly give my support to it considering the matters which have been raised with respect to the question period.

I shall resist the temptation to give my own views on the operation of the question period. I am sure each one of us has his own observations to make on this subject and it would probably be more productive to allow the committee to wrestle with the matter because there are real difficulties attached to it. I imagine that more than an extension in the time period would be required in order to overcome them. I believe you have been very generous in extending, by consent, the time allotted to the question period. Usually, I believe, it goes beyond the normal 40 minutes, and I doubt whether another 20 minutes, if we were to approve such an extension, would enable us to resolve the difficulty which the House now faces in dealing with this matter. Perhaps the committee should begin an examination of the question and perhaps we ought to arrange for a more extended discussion of the subject some time soon.

You have an unhappy responsibility in deciding every day which members are to be recognized among the very large number who rise in their places to ask questions. We on this side of the House have never pressed forward a claim that each hon. member should be seen by the Chair.

[Mr. MacEachen.]

We have accepted the tradition which has long been understood and practised that the question period is primarily, though certainly not exclusively, an opportunity for members of the opposition to interrogate the ministry. We do think, however, that from time to time hon. members on this side of the House should have an opportunity to put questions!

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacEachen: We have no desire to upset the tradition you have observed, Mr. Speaker. But on this side of the House, as well, hon. members frequently impress upon me the necessity of having an opportunity to ask questions. Well, each of us is a member. Each of us has the same rights, and if we were, every day, to attempt to assert our individual rights there would be no end to the question period, and—

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): I am glad you resisted the temptation to give your views!

Mr. MacEachen:—I would have to secure acceptance by the House of a much more strict observance of the rule of urgency attaching to questions.

The hon. member is concerned about the prospect that if parliament should end quickly some hon. members might not have had an opportunity to make their presence felt. This is a real concern on the part of every member. He does not want to go back, if we do go back, and admit to his constituents that having sat in the House of Commons for two or three months he has not been able to utter a single word, not even to ask a question. That is hardly a platform on which to seek acceptance. It is a real problem.

I sat in this House, I think, for six months before I even raised my head from the back benches. I was so far back I was almost outside the chamber. But members develop much more rapidly now, and they expect to catch the Speaker's eye the very first day. Well, we all cannot do that. I sympathize with hon. members in their problem. I do not think we want to snuff out the opportunity to ask questions. I think it could be done more rapidly, though. Maybe if we were to encourage the practice of giving notice it would help a bit. It is only by exception, today, that ministers receive notice of questions and despite the fact that we all try to take on the appearance of omniscience nobody has at his fingertips all the information which is required. If a minister is asked a question which involves gathering information, the matter is merely postponed until another day when another question might be asked.

As I say, we could perhaps benefit by adopting the British practice of making a greater use of notice. The Committee on Procedure examined this question a few years ago. It was as a result of a report from that committee and a decision of the House that a definite time limit for the question period was established. This was done in the belief that a shorter question period would make the question period brisker, and sharpen confrontation—that the intensity of the interrogation would be increased. Apparently, this has not happened. Anyway, I have not resisted the temptation to express my own views, but I extend an apology to you. I will co-operate in trying to get