

House of Commons Act

confident, or at least I hope, that the government will see to it that we can pursue this evolution which has brought us from a situation where we had no say in our administration to the present state of affairs, where we have an advisory committee which discusses matters of interest to the members of the House and which makes excellent recommendations which have indeed been approved by the Internal Economy Commission, so that we can take our destiny in hand as the final stage of this evolution. This would only be normal. As for the rest, as for my comments on parliamentary responsibility and government responsibility in the House, it is of course a much wider issue. I have used very strong words because I believe that it is time for us, as Members of Parliament, to reflect on this matter since, once again, we have put ourselves in this strait-jacket in which we operate, and it is up to us to get out of it.

● (1650)

[English]

Mr. David Smith (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): I would like to thank the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) for precipitating this discussion by bringing in this private member's bill. I know it is an issue that he is very familiar with and that he has spent many years working toward trying to improve the operation of the House with regard to matters of this nature. When we look at this issue, Mr. Speaker, I think it is necessary to look at how the Commissioners of Internal Economy came to have the jurisdiction that they have and where they came from.

The Commissioner of Internal Economy was established at the first session of Parliament. At that point, Mr. Speaker, Parliament met only a few weeks each year. Most of the employees employed by Parliament in those earlier days were mostly clerks and messengers who were employed on a temporary basis. They were employed for a few weeks or a couple of months at the most. Patronage was not unknown in those days; in fact, it was common and rather rampant. In 1867 and shortly thereafter it was desirable—and, as we all know that practice has long since died out and has become more or less extinct, at least at the federal level—that members from outside the Ottawa area, from more distant parts of Canada, should have jurisdiction over who was employed by Parliament on a temporary basis and who received these jobs. It was felt that to put this in the hands of members from the Ottawa area would be giving Jack the Ripper an Avon route. Perhaps it would result in some great injustices.

To protect Parliament in those days, the Board of Commissioners of Internal Economy was set up. The only members from outside the Ottawa area who were here all year round were cabinet ministers. In conducting research into the historical development of the existence of the Board of Commission-

ers of Internal Economy, I found that that seems to have been the rationale for the reason why they wound up doing the job they have been doing for so many years.

A few years ago, the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, recognizing the immensely more complex administrative requirements of the House in the late twentieth century, recommended the creation of the Standing Committee on Management and Members' Services so that members, other than the Speaker and ministers, could participate in the administrative decisions of the House. I think it is fair to say that probably most of the best improvements in the administration of the House have originated from this committee.

I think it could be argued that the situation does need review. This committee often meets in camera and rarely reports to the House. This does not mean to say that the members on the committee are unaware of its deliberations or its advice.

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that the committee does not have any executive authority in law. It remains with the Commissioners of Internal Economy. The committee can review the situation and hold what discussions they feel are appropriate and make whatever recommendations they feel are appropriate. In the final analysis, they do not have legal authority. This is something that has rested with the Commissioners of Internal Economy and continues to rest with them.

An example that we might look at is the Senate. These days some people tend to view the Senate as a bit of an anachronism in many ways. I suppose that is an issue that can be argued. Perhaps the example of the Senate is worth looking into. When you look at the Senate, you will find that almost all the administrative decisions that are taken there are not taken by the Speaker or in camera or by a body that does not report to the whole House, but by a standing committee that is accountable to the Senate.

What is the result of this? In recent months there have been many rumours and allegations, some of them perhaps based on fact, others on fiction. There have been counterclaims about the administration and the machinations that go on in the House. Of course, we have the nation's gossip columnists. Many of the political columnists have had a heyday talking about the debates and internal dissension that have, in fact, occurred.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): Order, please. The hour provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired. It being five o'clock, this House stands adjourned until Monday next at 2 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 2(1).

At 5 p.m. the House adjourned, without question put, pursuant to Standing Order.