

*Defence Purchasing Board*

the section. With regard to democratic responsibility and the possibility of the evasion of ministerial responsibility through and by means of the creation of this board, may I point out to the hon. member that every contract let by this board must be let with the approval of the governor general in council, on the recommendation of the Minister of Finance. This means that whether he likes it or not the Minister of Finance must take the responsibility of recommending to the governor general in council the awarding of a contract which has been recommended to him by the purchasing board. I do not think that is a departure from responsible government; in fact I feel it to be a very great intensification of responsible government, at least as far as the Minister of Finance is concerned. The bill also provides that if the board deems a certain course desirable in connection with a certain piece of business, such as calling for tenders and so forth, it must report to the Minister of Finance, who must inform his colleagues.

I can assure my hon. friend that the chain of responsibility exists; that it is very definite and, moreover, it ensures responsibility to this parliament, because the only thing that occurs to me in connection with which the government could plead public interest as a reason for not informing the house of the details of every contract and every order in council, would be wholly in connection with works of secrecy such as details of fortifications and that sort of thing. I cannot conceive of any other matter of public interest which would debar this house from obtaining full information with regard to the activities of the board; because, as I say, when those activities are translated into contractual form it must be done by means of an order in council on the recommendation of the Minister of Finance.

Mr. WALSH: Is there any set-up in connection with our government at the present time that is at all analogous to the proposed board?

Mr. DUNNING: I do not know that there is anything at the moment; the war purchasing commission during the war and the purchasing commission of Canada after the war are the nearest parallels that occur to my mind. I do not know of anything that has just the precise chain of board and ministerial responsibility contemplated by this legislation.

Mr. CAHAN: Mr. Chairman, I would like to place it on record that I think the change which has been outlined by the Minister of Finance is a reprehensible one which should not be endorsed by parliament. The Minister of Finance has a great number of departments under him now. He has more departments

[Mr. Dunning.]

under him than I think any man in his position can have the physical strength and the mental and intellectual activity to deal with properly. Now, simply because the Minister of National Defence has been found by a commission to be not quite qualified for the administration of a measure such as this—

Mr. MACKENZIE (Vancouver): I rise to a point of order, Mr. Chairman; I ask that that remark be withdrawn.

Mr. CAHAN: I am in order.

The CHAIRMAN: I think the point raised by the Minister of National Defence is well taken. The hon. member for St. Lawrence-St. George is an old parliamentarian, and I am sure he will withdraw.

Mr. CAHAN: I was simply stating that this board, which should be a branch of the Department of Defence, is for some reason transferred by this bill to the Minister of Finance and is placed more directly under his control. The Minister of Finance must know that I have a high appreciation of his intellectual and physical abilities, under ordinary circumstances, but I suggest he is quite incapable of attending to this additional work of administration. It is quite unnecessary that it should be transferred to him.

I believe I am in order when I say that the Department of National Defence should be so carefully organized that it can administer the work of national defence and all contracts collateral thereto. Of course the government must be responsible. The Minister of Public Works is responsible for public works; yet the contracts he places are brought by him, with his recommendation and that of his engineers and other officers, to the attention of the government, and his official acts are authorized by order in council. But if I may say so the governmental responsibility exercised by order in council is by way of a supervisory function, after the Minister of Public Works has made his recommendation, and an authorization is given upon that recommendation.

I dislike the change, and I do not think it should be made. If we become engaged in war—and we must trust providence that war will not ensue—the Minister of National Defence ought to be in the primary responsible position. The Minister of Finance will find that he is so absorbed in his own work that he will have no time to assume these further responsibilities.

Let us deal with the matter now. For the sake of the country let us deal fairly with it. If we are to have a department of national defence let that department assume the