

Control of Government Expenditures

one time but that departmental officials can also attend. Frequently they can testify directly before the committee, sometimes in the presence of the minister or his parliamentary secretary and sometimes on their own. That flexibility I am sure did not exist in committee of the whole. Certainly we do not see it in remaining procedures involving committee of the whole House. Officials can appear in the House—that is, they can sit in the House—but they may only talk through elected representatives. In the House an hon. member cannot question an official directly, whereas in a standing committee he can. That is certainly of benefit to hon. members who are serious about examining estimates.

Another important effect, Mr. Speaker, of the flexibility that has been introduced into our committee proceedings may best be exemplified if I tell hon. members what I saw when I once attended the proceedings of the Public Accounts Committee. I was not a member of the committee and did not participate in the proceedings: I simply dropped in and watched a very important meeting taking place. At that time the government was being questioned on a certain tax agreement that it has entered into with the Ford Motor Company. Members of the opposition undoubtedly were able to ask questions about a most important subject. Present at the meeting were just about all the responsible officials who could conduct a meaningful examination into that section of the estimates.

• (2130)

The Auditor General—or on this occasion I believe it was his deputy—was in attendance. The Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce, the Minister of National Revenue, because this matter involved a tax concession, and their officials were present. The officials of the Department of Finance, the Department of National Revenue and the Department of Trade and Commerce were all there. There was no opportunity, as had existed under the previous system, to pass the buck. I know this feature was welcomed by opposition members. The questioning was very good and very vigorous. The proceedings of the committee on that occasion were a chronicle of the maximum potential achieved in a system wherein the estimates of various departments are examined in a meaningful way before a standing committee.

The rule changes, upon recommendation of the Public Accounts Committee and the Auditor General, led to better preparation and presentation of the estimates, the result being that members were in a position to compare the figures with those of the previous year, those estimated and what was actually spent in the previous year. Any member who wishes to conduct a thorough examination of the estimates can do it with a minimum of difficulty. In other words, because of the rule changes that were introduced in this Parliament we have taken other important steps which should be reviewed, not the least of which is the allocation of research funds to the opposition parties. I think this fact has been largely overlooked in this debate.

What has happened in this combination is that a tremendous potential exists for expertise and specialization to be developed in the opposition parties. Imagine the effective manner in which estimates could be examined if the opposition parties would take the trouble to allocate one or two

[Mr. Jerome.]

members thoroughly to study a particular subject. They could pool all the talent—I am using that word in a generous sense—of six, seven or eight members of the combined opposition parties and with their combined resources of research staff they could develop in respect of each department's estimates a team which could go into every item. There could be developed a team on each subject and each department which could undertake a thorough and meaningful examination of the estimates.

The truth is that this is not done, but that is not the fault of the system. The fact is that the research assistants are busy writing funny speeches for the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) or are campaigning for the New Democrats in by-elections. These are all areas to which these talents are being directed, and that is the choice of the opposition. If they want to be spendthrift and wasteful with these resources, fine—but why come here and say that the estimates are not being carefully examined? The truth is plain and clear—the facilities and opportunities exist but they are not being used to advantage. There are 25 opposition days in the three semesters in which the year is calendarised. Any opposition member who is truthful will admit that sometimes during the course of the parliamentary year it is difficult for the opposition to fill up those opposition days with a subject of criticism of the government.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

An hon. Member: Nonsense.

Mr. Jerome: It is the truth. There are too many opposition days—25 is too many. But if the system were to be changed by the government so that the number of days was reduced, we know the cries that would be heard from the opposition benches to the effect that we were trampling on the rights of a democratic society.

Mr. Downey: I rise on a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member for Sudbury (Mr. Jerome) obviously has not much on his mind. I am wondering if we could relieve him by letting him know that he does not have to talk out this motion.

[Translation]

Mr. Valade: Mr. Speaker,—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. The hon. member for Sainte-Marie rises on a point of order.

Mr. Valade: Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. member has used up all the time allotted to him, and Your Honour should now recognize a member on this side of the House.

[English]

Mr. Jerome: Well, Mr. Speaker, opposition members have an opportunity to participate in the debate. Why do they not get up and make a speech?

• (2140)

[Translation]

Mr. Valade: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. The hon. member raises a question of privilege concerning the time allocated to the parliamentary secretary, and I will