

Supply—Privy Council

just so that he will be present if someone wishes to ask a question not perhaps for the purpose of seeking information but rather for the purpose of tendering information, especially when, as the hon. member for Prince Edward-Hastings indicates, the questions are very often ruled out of order.

I think ministers have a responsibility in respect of answering questions in the house but I also believe that ministers should also have an opportunity to attend meetings of cabinet committees and to deal with other departmental matters during some of this time. In this regard a conflict occurs in the parliamentary system because ministers are required not only to be executives but also to bear their responsibility as members of parliament and be present in this house. It would seem to me that the system we are putting forward is the only way under a modern and effective system of government that we can assure that there is an opportunity for parliamentary questioning and also an opportunity for the ministers to engage in their departmental responsibilities.

I have made reference to the British system. There seems to be some considerable misconception about it. It might be useful if I were to address a few remarks to the house on this point. First of all, the British system requires that questions not be asked, as the vast majority of questions during our question period are asked, without advance notice to the responsible minister. It requires that written notice of the question be given to the table. It reserves to the table, or to the clerk of the house, the responsibility to decide whether or not the question is in order. Apart altogether from the question of order it reserves to the decision of the Chair whether or not a particular question should be accepted at the time just from the standpoint of the sheer volume of questions coming forward.

In the United Kingdom parliament—and I do not think it is an undemocratic institution—the ministers are not required by the rules of that house to be in the house every day five days of the week. Rather, a roster is established whereby in practice a minister may be questioned in the house perhaps only once every three weeks or so. If I may use the Canadian ministries as an illustration, the situation there is that the roster would call for, first, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, second, the Minister of Finance and, third, the Minister of Agriculture. In the British system all outstanding questions of which notice had been given to the secretary of state

for external affairs would be called and spontaneous supplementary questions would be allowed at that time. The effect, therefore, under the British system of government would be that a question after it has been accepted by the Chair might not be responded to for as much as three weeks after having been put forward.

I believe it can be fairly said that in an attempt to provide at the same time an opportunity for a minister to take care of the heavy demands on his time and an opportunity for members to pose questions in the house, the proposed arrangement is very reasonable. Hon. members are not being asked to do what I understand was the practice at one time in this house, that is, give advance written notice, even the courtesy of advance written notice as little as an hour beforehand. Members may ask questions without any notice at all to the minister. They may direct a question on three days of the week either to the minister directly responsible for a particular department or to the acting minister. If the purpose of the question really is to seek information, then surely it obviously is better that the minister be given at least the courtesy of an hour's notice of the subject involved in the question which the hon. member proposes to ask him.

Mr. Hees: Would the minister allow me to ask a question?

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): By all means.

Mr. Hees: Does he think for one moment that during the six years we were in power either Mr. Pearson, Mr. Martin, Mr. Chevrier or Mr. Pickersgill ever gave any minister notice? I can assure him they did not.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): I see. Well it seems to me that that only brings forth the observation that two wrongs do not make a right.

Mr. Hees: Then for heaven's sake stop preaching to the house.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): I have difficulty preaching to the hon. member. I wish he would open his ears as freely as he opens his mouth.

Mr. Hees: I am opening my ears but I simply object to a lot of the nonsense you are uttering.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): I am not trying to provoke the hon. member and I am sure he is not trying to provoke me. I hear some very