

meeting of the committee. I regret very much that the hon. member was there at 3.30, but the question period was not over at that time. It was not a question of getting a quorum in the committee but rather whether the committee should meet.

Mr. Benjamin: I waited for half an hour.

Mr. Stewart (Cochrane): Mr. Speaker, on the point of order raised by the hon. member for St. John's East, may I assure the hon. member that as chairman of the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts I do not take direction from the government as to the business to be heard. As far as any decision to hear certain departments is concerned, this decision is arrived at through consultations with other party members on that committee. As a matter of fact, there are so many different departments and agencies referred to this committee that it is impossible to examine all their estimates in the course of a year, much less in the time we have been given.

As far as the hearing tonight with regard to Information Canada is concerned, there would not have been an opportunity to examine these estimates at all had it not been for the fact that we disposed of one item of the Secretary of State's department yesterday. This left us with time to examine the estimates of Information Canada, since it happens to be an agency that is important and should be examined. However, there is certainly not time to hear from all departments. I point out to the hon. member for St. John's East that at the present time he is not a member of this committee, so therefore is not in a position to know what has taken place up to now. As I say, it has not been possible to schedule any other meetings to hear from this particular agency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Egmont on the same point of order.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Yes, Mr. Speaker, on the same point of order. With respect to the basic question that was touched on by the hon. member for Cochrane namely the increasingly difficult situation in which we find ourselves each year with very limited time to deal with so many departmental estimates, particularly when government expenditure is increasing every year, would it not be possible for the procedure and organization committee to give this matter some priority of examination in order to introduce a formula that would be a good deal more workable than the present one set out in Standing Order 58(14)?

On a more practical note, I am sorry that the government House leader is not in his place, but earlier he said that he would give consideration to the referral of annual reports to various committees in order that the basic work done by committees of scrutinizing government expenditures and programs could continue. If the government House leader could give us some assurance that these reports would be referred to committees, presumably some of the pressures referred to by hon. members on both sides of the House would be relieved. I think it is important that the House have a much better opportunity to examine the workings of government departments than it has under this present prohibition.

Business of the House

● (1620)

Mr. Howard: Mr. Speaker, it seems that a number of factors have emerged all of a sudden. The matter of the Committee of Transport and Communications having a meeting scheduled for 3.30 this afternoon to consider the estimates of the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority, and other committees having just this last day to consider estimates, brings us to the point that I think we might want to consider altering the Standing Order that demands that the estimates be deemed to have been adopted by the end of May. We might want to provide additional time to do this cleanup work and also to do a very much better job of considering the estimates. If we do not move in that direction ourselves, we shall be open to some rather serious charges of completely disregarding the expenditure of public funds.

I am not referring only to the Committee on Transport and Communications, but that is the one of which I am a member and in respect of which I am particularly concerned. I wonder if I might put forward the suggestion, not to seek consent to it now, but so that the House leaders might discuss it and come back later today with agreement on a course of action. I suggest that Standing Order 58(14), the one in question, be amended for this session so that instead of today, May 31, being the time when estimates are extracted from these committees automatically, whether they have been considered or not, we extend the time to June 15. This procedure would give the committees another couple of weeks to do a proper and thorough job of considering all those estimates with which they have so far not dealt. Perhaps that might get us out of a very awkward situation.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Agreed.

Some hon. Members: No.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, I wonder, now that the government House leader—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Let me say to the hon. member for Egmont (Mr. MacDonald), in view of my ruling in respect of other hon. members wishing to speak on this point of order, he may not speak now. Hon. members are allowed to make one contribution and that is all. I regret to have to take that action.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege. I was merely rising to invite the government House leader to respond to my suggestion, in view of his earlier indication that he would consider the proposal to refer the annual reports, in order that we might clear this impasse and make the work of the committees more effective.

Mr. MacEachen: Mr. Speaker, in respect of the point raised earlier, by the Leader of the Opposition, as to whether there would be some arrangement or extension in respect of a particular committee, namely the Standing Committee on Regional Development, that committee has reported and has completed its study of the estimates. It was in respect of that committee I had promised consideration.

Mr. McGrath: What about the motion?