

Attendance of Ministers in House

this morning, I notice that on Monday, 11 out of 29 ministers will be in the house, on Tuesday, there will be 13, on Thursday, 18, and on Friday, 14; an average of 14 ministers for these four days.

An hon. Member: And Wednesday?

Mr. Rondeau: On Wednesday, all ministers are supposed to be in the house. But last week, we noticed that many ministers whose names were on the list for Wednesday were absent; that is why I say that within a few weeks, when we will be used to this timetable, the average will not be 14 ministers out of 29 in the house, but there will be fewer than 10 of them, so that we will have an average of one minister out of 3 in the house every day. This means a very weak representation of those responsible for the various departments.

Mr. Speaker, in this connection, I should like to quote an article published in the newspaper *Dimanche-Matin*, of October 13:

The case of the Minister of Transport, Mr. Paul Hellyer, is typical. This minister administers the largest department in the country. Furthermore, he is responsible for the housing policy. To that end, he conducts personally an inquiry across the country.

Half of the questions asked in the house deal with transportation problems or housing problems. At the present time, the minister is unable to sit in the house the three days assigned to him. Several Liberals are quite unhappy with the Prime Minister's decision.

I think that the motion to refer that decision to the committee on procedure should be passed, because had that decision not been taken unilaterally by the right hon. Prime Minister, he might have avoided all the criticisms put forward up to now, or in the future. We would thus have saved the house considerable time to end up probably with the same results, while the committee on procedure will have to decide in the last resort upon a procedure with regard to the attendance of the ministers in the house.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

[*English*]

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is not my desire to limit the contributions to this debate, but I have the impression that I have heard most of the arguments for and against the motion, be they valid, invalid, relevant or irrelevant. However, I am pleased to hear hon. members who feel they may have something new to add to the debate.

29180—73½

Mr. W. B. Nesbitt (Oxford): Mr. Speaker, I do not wish to prolong the discussion of this important question of privilege, but there is one matter that I think has not been brought to Your Honour's attention. It is this. This afternoon, if I heard the right hon. gentleman correctly, the Prime Minister clarified the position of the government inasmuch as he pointed out in his remarks that it was not the intention of the government to have questions directed to certain departments of government on certain sitting days of this house, something which perhaps was not clear before.

Let me point out, Mr. Speaker, that this creates a dilemma under our rules. It has always been my understanding in the years I have been in this house that questions on the orders of the day must have two basic qualifications: first, they must be urgent; second, they must be of national importance.

The schedule that has been distributed by the government house leader to all hon. members of the house indicates that on Mondays and Tuesdays of each week the Minister of Agriculture and his parliamentary secretary will not be present to answer questions. As a result, Mr. Speaker, an anomaly is created. For example, following the rule of urgency, recently a number of questions were asked in the house of the Minister of Agriculture in connection with imports of corn from the United States and their effect on the Canadian market. This, Mr. Speaker, is an urgent matter; the price of corn in this country fluctuates daily and affects the livelihood of many people in Canada.

Last Friday the Minister of Agriculture was asked what remedies were being proposed to meet this problem and the minister replied to the effect that discussions were taking place with the government of the United States of America and that he hoped some recommendations would be ready very soon.

• (3:20 p.m.)

Well, Your Honour, that was last Friday. It is now Tuesday and the Minister of Agriculture is not in the house, nor would he have been in the house yesterday, according to the rota, if we had been sitting. It is true he will be here tomorrow unless, of course, he is prevented by government duties elsewhere.

Mr. Knowles: He will be here later today to deal with his legislation.

Mr. Nesbitt: We have seen that other ministers who are supposed to be here do not