

and should the range of documents and information made available to members of parliament. In my colleagues names there stand on the order paper scores of motions calling for evaluation studies. There are at least 22 more motions, in my name, of a similar nature. Hon. members may be pleased to hear that I do not propose to quote them seriatim. All these motions, mine and those of my colleagues, point toward the same principle that decisions are being made at the executive level which involve billions of dollars, the wisdom of which we have to take largely on the say of the ministry.

The ministry would not be unique if it did not put its own activities in the best light. But the role of the opposition, the role of parliament, is not merely to act as a "clack" for the executive. I suggest that if we had more information at our disposal we could carry on our traditional function more effectively. I suggest, for what it is worth, that if we had more information some of the political snarkiness and partisan backbiting might recede so that we could do a good job on some of the issues which the public would like us to deal with.

Mr. Charles Turner (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Labour): Mr. Speaker, it must be pointed out that this is the fifth time the hon. member for Toronto-Lakeshore (Mr. Grier) has had this House debate the matter of departmental program forecasts.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Good for him.

Mr. Turner (London East): Good, yes. I am still not perfectly clear, however, whether the hon. member for Toronto-Lakeshore has raised these motions as a matter of principle or as a dedicated search for knowledge. The Treasury Board calls for the program forecasts of departments so that a wide array of potential program matters can be assembled at one point in time and examined on an integrated basis. These program forecasts are tentative plans only: they are proposals developed by public servants within the particular mandate of an individual department. When they are being prepared, few restrictions are made on their scope and individual departments submit their proposals without any full appreciation of the total policy, priority or financial parameters that the Treasury Board will use when selecting appropriated resource allocations.

Invariably, the total amount proposed in the program forecasts of all departments collectively greatly exceeds the available resources that the government can direct to both new and ongoing programs. The program forecasts are prepared many months in advance. I believe departments begin work late in the year on forecasts that lead to the main estimates for a fiscal year that will not even begin until about 18 months later and will end about 30 months after the initial planning. The projections that are included in program forecasts for additional future years would, of course, be even less well defined. Prior to the Treasury Board's examination of the program forecasts, the cabinet must review both their longer-range and their short-range objectives and priorities. Revenues from taxes and other sources must be estimated and the general economic situation for Canada during the year under study must be evaluated.

Transport Budget Forecast

Within this framework, selections must be made from the many competing proposals, and most departments will be disappointed by the number of their plans which do not receive support. After extensive consideration by cabinet ministers, the results of the program review are reported to the individual departments. It is my understanding, however, that departments are not required to edit or correct their program forecasts after the decisions have been reached. As they were only tentative proposals in the first place, their primary usefulness has been served and the departments shift their attention to the details of preparing their main estimates submissions in accordance with the results of the program review.

The end product, of course, is the annual blue book. This is one of the main reasons the program forecasts of departments are treated as internal documents. Proposals prepared by public servants so far in advance of the date of execution, and without full awareness of total government considerations, should not be subjected to intense review by members of parliament using the wisdom of hindsight. This, surely, would tend to discourage the development of imaginative proposals in the future.

In addition to this principle of confidentiality there is a practical flaw in what this motion proposes. Information is a delicate commodity and it is only useful if it fits the purpose. It is easy to have too much information and not enough knowledge. I believe that the adoption of this motion would produce an excess of information but very little additional knowledge or understanding. I am sure we all agree that the confidentiality of the government's spending proposals is such that no information concerning main estimates could be generally released to all members of parliament prior to the tabling of the estimates. This occurs in February, and our standing committees then have until the end of May to study the estimates in considerable detail.

The blue book each year contains over 600 pages of detailed information in each of the official languages, or over 1,200 pages in total. It is my opinion that the availability of many times that amount of information, which still would have to be studied within the same time-frame if the operations of government were to continue, would be more of a distraction than a help in our search for knowledge and understanding of the estimates. And this would be the situation if each member of this House received a copy of the program forecast for every department and agency.

We all have full schedules: we must divide our time wisely between our constituency duties and our work in the House. Appropriation acts are important, but there also is a large amount of other legislation that we must study and debate intelligently. In considering the main estimates, I doubt whether many members would have the time to study this additional information or, in fact, would need it to enhance their understanding. Our standing committees provide ample opportunity for detailed examination of particular programs in the estimates, through the questioning of ministers and officials. Additional written information can be obtained from these officials if a committee member so requests. But selectivity is the key to knowledge here, not tons of information.