

Supply

this House of doing that—where the House Leader and the Whip are told to go and round up 30, 40 50 speakers for second reading debates on numerous occasions, and anyone who looks at *Hansard* knows that is the case, that has to stop if we are going to have a climate in which we can achieve some of these worth-while things suggested by Members such as the Hon. Member for Nepean-Carleton.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Mr. Speaker, I want to participate in this debate because some parts of the motion I can agree with, but for entirely different reasons than those put forward by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Nielsen). The motion refers to the Government's:

—deliberate and persistent undermining of the parliamentary process—

I do not know about the word "deliberate", but it certainly has been persistent. Quite often it might have been only by accident because Members opposite did not know what the hell they were doing. The motion continues:

—and for its continuing attempts to reduce Parliament and Parliamentary government to an irrelevant appendix in the formulation and application of major national policy decisions—

I want to start off, Mr. Speaker, on the premise that we are sort of a child or creature, successor or inheritor, of the British parliamentary traditions and practices. But over the past four or five years I do not believe there have been any statements by Ministers on motions. There is the matter of Cabinet Ministers being present to answer questions in the House. It seems to me that a Government of whatever political stripe has to be forthright and forthcoming, and it should present a policy or Bill to Parliament first before anyone else. The practice, which has become somewhat endemic over the last several years, of holding press conferences and flitting around the country to announce the Government's intentions surely can be nothing more than a depletion and may be an accidental, if not deliberate, downgrading of Parliament and the parliamentary system.

I submit that when the Government refuses to announce policy in the House of Commons and chooses instead a press conference across the street or somewhere else in the country, it in fact becomes a victim of its own actions and the complaints, as has just been enunciated by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Government House Leader, about the Opposition taking up inordinate time making speeches, have been incited by the Government. A Minister could have got up in the House, the Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) or the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), and announced the Government's policy and intentions regarding the statutory grain rates. I recall under Speaker Lamoureux and for a while under Speaker Jerome that the Minister made a statement, it took him 10, 12 or 15 minutes, and one spokesman from each Party responded for not more than the same length of time, but most often less. One or two questioners from each Party could ask questions of the Minister. I am quite agreeable to our setting aside one hour for one, two or three days a week for statements by Ministers, and we used that time to obtain in Parliament first the Government's policy and legislation. I have often

wondered whether there should not be some questions at first reading, but I will leave that aside.

Going to another aspect, Mr. Speaker, I often wonder what would happen if we could reach unanimous agreement that none of us will make a statement or announcement or send out a press release until we actually did it in the House of Commons. There would be a few exceptions to that on minor details when a backbencher wanted to send out something to his constituents and the local media about a private Bill he is proposing. It would be interesting if the Press Gallery had to wait like MPs do on both sides of the House to hear what a Minister has to say at a press conference in Winnipeg or Gopher Gulch or wherever else. But there is the media getting the news while MPs are sitting down here wondering what it is he is going to say. Surely a Government of any political stripe doing that is evading and avoiding the parliamentary system. In fact, I submit that the Minister of Transport would have had much less difficulty if he had been more forthright and forthcoming in this Chamber over his proposals on Dominion coal lands, rial line upgrading, statutory grain rates, and if his four predecessors—and I have been through five Ministers of Transport since I have come here—had been more forthright and forthcoming in this Chamber. They would have had a lot less difficulty in subsequent dealings with whatever it was he was bringing forward in Parliament.

• (1720)

It seems to me, involving the matter of the presence of Cabinet Ministers, that there is an onus on Members of the Opposition, as a matter of courtesy as well as for the sake of obtaining information, to give notice of it to Cabinet Ministers. If it is something that just came up in the hour before Question Period, it could be a hurried phone call or a note across the floor. If it is a matter in which one has tried, through one's caucus, to be recognized in Question Period for several days, one could give several days' notice. However, once the notice is given, the Minister should be here to answer or he should provide the answer to the acting Minister or to the Parliamentary Secretary.

It is common practice and knowledge amongst Members of the Opposition and, I suspect, amongst backbenchers on the Government side, that if the Minister to whom one wants to direct a question will not be present that day, one will not ask the question. We have all phoned up a Minister's office to ask whether he will be present during Question Period that day. If he will not be there, one will not ask a question because otherwise it is a totally wasted question. Lord knows how many more days it will be before one is recognized. Therefore, the presence of Ministers should be a requirement, particularly when they know, either by notice or because of something very obvious, such as a disaster, that they will be asked questions the next day by the very first questioner. I appreciate the fact that Ministers cannot plan their schedules very well, but who the dickens can in our type of job? It is part of the hazards of the occupation.