

Supply—National Defence

There are a number of questions I should like to ask the minister in this respect. I understand that all the destroyers under construction are of the St. Laurent class, but with respect to the destroyers in commission, of which there are 12, I believe I am correct that one is of the St. Laurent class, two are of the Crescent class, and I presume the rest are Tribal class. If I am mistaken I hope the minister will correct me.

There are a number of questions I should like to ask the minister with respect to these destroyers. First of all, when these Tribal class destroyers were converted and altered to suit modern conditions, what was the individual cost of converting these ships? More than that, I should like to know what is the life expectancy of these converted ships. Will they be good for three, five, ten years or what? I should also like to know what is the life expectancy of the new St. Laurent class. Are they expected to last five years, ten years, or what? I think these are things we should know.

Then I come to frigates; they are next on the list. I see that we have ten frigates in commission, and I gather that there are three on loan to the Royal Norwegian Navy. Then there are six in reserve and five being converted. The term "frigate" is to me, at least, a very confusing one. I should like to know a number of things about these frigates and I hope the minister will be able to give us the answers. In view of the very wide knowledge and information given members of the British House of Commons I cannot see that I would be asking improper questions when I put these questions to the minister.

First of all, are any of these frigates now in commission converted destroyers? Second, when were the frigates built that are in commission, in reserve or undergoing conversion? Third, what did the modernization of these frigates cost? Are they fast enough and capable enough to overtake and destroy or capture a modern Russian submarine? I think these are things we should know. The minister can tell us without disclosing their speed or anything of that nature. What is the life expectancy of these frigates? Are they expected to last three years, five years or how long? Do these frigates still have reciprocating engines or have turbines been supplied?

These are very pertinent questions. Are these frigates similar to the frigates that were in use at the end of world war II and have they just been altered and converted, or are they similar to the new frigates in the British navy which cost £2½ million each and are really very much more like a destroyer? I believe these new British frigates are known as the Daring class. I should like to find that

out, and I do not think it is proper for members on this side of the house to be expected to make remarks on the estimates of the department without knowing these facts.

Next I refer to the coastal escorts. I should like to know what kind of ships these are. Do they include former Algerine class minesweepers? Then I should like to refer to the use of helicopters. At the top of page 38 of the white paper for this year I find the following:

An experimental anti-submarine helicopter unit has been formed to carry out trials with new underwater detection equipment and to perfect techniques for the use of this equipment.

I believe last year's white paper referred to the fact that there were going to be six helicopters used on an experimental basis.

The last thing I should like to deal with is whether sufficient provision is being made to look after our defence adequately, to take care of what we have to do. It would take me about five minutes to complete my remarks, Mr. Chairman. I see it is two minutes to six, and I wonder whether I might have permission to continue.

The Chairman: Is it agreed?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is very hard to say whether or not we have sufficient to take care of these matters until the minister answers some of the questions I have asked. However, there are some observations I think any member can draw from the white paper and from the estimates themselves without having yet received the answers I have asked of the minister. First of all, let me take cruisers. Why do we have these cruisers at all? If our navy is to be an anti-submarine navy, what is the purpose of these cruisers? They have a large complement, presumably 800 or 900 men, are very expensive to maintain and I cannot see that they perform any useful purpose except perhaps for training. As far as training is concerned, I am quite sure that could be carried out better in some respects with destroyer escorts, because that is the type of ship which our navy is using as its backbone, and I think properly so.

By way of a second observation and recommendation, may I say that I hope the government does everything it can to hurry up the completion of construction of the remaining 13 destroyer escorts. As I said before, from what I have been able to gather these are a very fine class of ship and our navy can well use them, particularly in defence against submarines, especially in Arctic waters where weather is a factor. We need these ships to defend ourselves.