

Control of Government Expenditures

estimates and expenditures. I, therefore, propose to discuss this matter, as I have already said, in terms of looking at the ways in which the House of Commons deals with the estimates.

As hon. members are aware, we made some pretty drastic changes in our procedures a few years ago, and I want to say quite openly that I think in some respects the changes that we made were good. I believe that we did improve the process by which we handle legislation. I think it was a good idea for us to arrange for practically all bills to go to standing committees and for us to eliminate the duplication that we used to have when a bill could be discussed at length in a standing committee and again at length in the committee of the whole House. We got around the complaint that might arise because bills go to standing committees that members not on those committees do not have a chance to speak on the bill by providing for the report stage at which it is possible for any member, by putting down a motion, to achieve a discussion on a phase of the bill in which he is interested. That is not before us today, but I felt that I would like to say that I think we did a good job in the changes we made with respect to the legislative process.

However, I think we have not succeeded to the same extent—in fact I think we have not succeeded at all—in our efforts to find a better way to deal with the estimates or the expenditures which parliament is called upon to vote. I welcome the attendance in the House this afternoon of the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury), and I hope he will take the remarks I wish to offer in the vein in which I present them. I present them not as an attack upon the government but rather as a plea that the House of Commons as a whole take a new look at the whole question of how we handle our expenditures. I am frequently twitted about the fact that I have been around here for a few years. As I said last night, I am only beginning my stay in parliament, for I hope to be around for several decades yet.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): But I have been here long enough to see estimates handled in four different ways, not one of them perfect. When I first came here estimates were still being handled in just about the same way they were dealt with back in 1867. They were dealt with in the committee of supply, and every individual item had to be called. There was no time limit of any kind, either on an individual item or on the total amount of time to be spent on the estimates. There were some other aspects of the supply process that were quite interesting in those days that I need not go into. The point I am making is that that is the original way in which estimates were handled, namely, by every item coming before the committee of supply, which was a committee of the whole House, and I emphasize the fact that there was no time limit so that a minister had to give some kind of satisfaction or answer to the questions that were being put before he could get his estimates through the House of Commons.

In retrospect I think that was the best of the four systems that I have seen tried in the House of Commons, but I have to say that with the much larger volume of business

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

of all kinds, including the increased amount that comes under the heading of expenditures, the year is not long enough for us to go back to that system under which all of the estimates were dealt with in the committee of supply on the floor of the House of Commons. We just could not handle it if we did it in that way and, as a matter of fact, that is the reason that quite a few years ago we made a significant change. That change—and I come now to the second regime which I have experienced with regard to estimates—was to provide for all the estimates still to be considered in the committee of supply but for there to be a total time limit. It escapes my memory whether we had a longer period of time at one stage, but at any rate, 30 days was, for quite a period of time, the total length of time that was allotted to the estimates. We fixed that limit of 30 days because the year was not long enough for us to continue the practice that had been in effect since 1867.

When we started the practice of dealing with estimates on the floor of the House under a time limit of 30 days, we found that it saved a lot of time but we also soon found that it was terribly unsatisfactory. There were many departments to be dealt with, so we had to take a department for only a day or two, then let it stand, and move on to another department for a day or two in order that we might have some time, even if it was only half a day in some cases, for all of the departments. It sounded a plausible way to deal with things. It sounded as though it was a responsible and a proper use of time, but it soon developed that a minister whose estimates were called knew that he had one day or two days to sit there and listen to the speeches. He knew we would not get off the first item. He knew he would not have to answer any questions. He knew that when the day or two allotted to him expired, that would be the end of his appearance until we got to the end of the thirtieth day and then, on that occasion, the total of the estimates would be voted.

• (1550)

It meant that during those 30 days we had lots of speeches. When agriculture was called the farming members spoke for a couple of days. When labour estimates were called, members interested in labour matters spoke. When external affairs estimates were called we had the sophisticated speeches of these esoteric people who know all about international relations. But we soon came to realize that although this second arrangement was a time saver, it really was not satisfactory at all.

So the day came when we proceeded to make another change. It was in the transition from the second regime I have just talked about to the present one. For one session, or perhaps two, we had a half and half arrangement. Let me describe that half and half arrangement. In that session or two we sent most of the estimates to various committees, but we arranged to keep three or four departments on the floor of the House of Commons. The choice as to which departments would be dealt with on the floor of the House of Commons was left to the opposition.

I want to say that I think that system worked fairly well. The difficulty was that it was agreed to only as a transitional move, and there never was any plan for that system to be continued. The effect of that system was that the estimates that went to committees got a certain amount of discussion, and one right that the opposition had up its