

Mr. Speaker, how do I envisage this extension of control by members of parliament taking place? The answer is the combining of a liberalized inquiry role, including automatic referral of annual reports, with a better and more effective use of the tools that are already available to our committees. The Senate really has shown the way to the House of Commons by its willingness to hire experts. We in the House of Commons have been reluctant to hire experts in the past, but nothing under our rules prevents our obtaining the expertise necessary to compensate for any expertise advantage which civil servants may have over Members of Parliament.

I am suggesting that members of parliament, whether they are opposition members or government backbenchers, will never be able to play the effective role which the public expect them to play in legislative changes, government programs and controlling government bureaucracy unless they equip themselves and their committees to overcome the expertise advantage of civil servants.

Mr. Alexander: Right.

Mr. Watson: Cynics may say that such a broadened committees' role is not feasible because a government would be asking for trouble by giving parliamentary committees the free rein that referral of annual reports would give to them, because governments normally do not look for trouble, and the traditionalists in the official opposition and elsewhere in the House would view this as a certain sign that we are headed toward a congressional system. This is simply not so, Mr. Speaker. I would argue that the calibre of Members of Parliament in this House and that we will find in future Canadian parliaments will not continue to accept their major role, if they are government backbenchers, as that of a vote-caster to maintain the government in power, or as a vote-caster to maintain his party's line if he is in opposition. Members will agree that if such a broadened inquiry system is to prove productive, then every side of the House will have to change its attitude toward the day to day operations of its committees.

Obviously, the inquiry role of a committee will only be effective if the inquiry is approached in a fairly non-partisan way. There have been effective inquiry roles for committees in past parliaments, and they have been effective because members of all parties have conducted themselves in a non-partisan way.

Other changes of attitude will have to accompany a broader inquiry role. The government will have to learn to live with adverse and critical committee reports, and the opposition will have to restrain itself from undue partisan exploitation of adverse reports. Both government and opposition should regard these reports, which under our rules are not binding upon the government, as an additional weapon in alerting and informing public opinion. The government would have the legal right to ignore a report, but unless it was on very solid ground it would do so at its peril. It goes without saying that accompanying a broader committee role and more committee reports there must be changes in the time allotted under the rules of this House for the debate of committee reports.

The Budget—Mr. Kuntz

• (1630)

How do we achieve this expanded inquiry capacity? The government could do it either by a simple declaration of intention which would be followed by referral of reports to the respective committees, and which would not be necessarily binding upon any subsequent government or—and I would prefer this—to make the change more permanent the House would agree to incorporate such an automatic referral into the orders and rules of this House.

I urge the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and this government to give serious consideration to such a broadened committee rule, not just for this parliament but for the effect it will have on future parliaments. The public expects us as members of parliament to be more influential. We can be more influential than we now are by using the tools available to us in committee. However, over the years I have found that with the government's control over orders of reference to committees, unless an annual report is before a committee it is almost impossible for it to get going on a subject as quickly as it should. Without an automatic system, the item is passed over. It is lost in the events that develop a few days later. By the time the committee is ready to return to it, it may be too late. If we had a system where committees would automatically receive reports, there would be no problem in proceeding when an inquiry was necessary.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would say to the traditionalists in both government and opposition that an expended committee inquiry role is not congressionalism in disguise; it is not a Trojan horse that will foist republicanism on an unsuspecting Canadian public; it will not have any of the dire consequences for the British parliamentary system and responsible government which traditionalists fear. But it will give Members of Parliament of every party in this House new opportunities, as representatives of their constituents and as representatives of the Canadian people as a whole, to contribute to improving the manner and the ways in which this country is governed. The new generation of members in this House will accept no less. The Canadian public will accept no less of their Members of Parliament.

Mr. Harry Kuntz (Battle River): Mr. Speaker, like the members who have spoken before me, I would like to add my sincere congratulations upon your re-election as presiding officer of the House of Commons. It is my understanding that in the past you have conducted this office in a very fair and wise manner, and I am confident this will hold true in the future. I would also like to extend my congratulations to the Deputy Speaker, the Deputy Chairman of Committees and all those who have been appointed ministers of the Crown or parliamentary secretaries. You have taken on heavy burdens of responsibility and should be commended for this.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Kuntz: At the outset, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr. Cliff Downey, of Castor, Alberta. Mr. Downey served my constituency throughout the twenty-eighth parliament, and he served it with sincerity and desire.