

Supply—Privy Council

be made much more difficult for us. I do not accept that proposition either. Through proper consultation and reasonable discussion I think this area of difference between us might well be worked out. I make the simple statement of fact to the government that every day this method continues to be perpetuated makes it that much more difficult to work out a logical, sensible solution such as we must have.

I do not mind saying that probably I was one of the members who was in the mind of the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre when he talked about the trip to England. I do not mind admitting that the memo I gave to the special committee on procedure contained the suggestion that we should have a look at this system. I attended the question period at Westminster almost every day. I talked with private members, ministers, some former ministers and former privy councillors. I say to you, sir, and to this committee that the system has been a complete failure in the United Kingdom.

• (2:40 p.m.)

The other day I read a book entitled "The Power Of The Prime Minister" by Humphrey Berkeley, who is a liberal-minded member of the Conservative party. He has been most interested in this problem and its ramifications with regard to parliamentary procedure. In the book he expounds his views and recommends many things. Most emphatically and categorically he says that the present system in the United Kingdom is a complete failure. It simply does not work. He cites examples showing that members sometimes have to wait four, five or six weeks to secure an answer. That is not good enough.

I know that ministers have responsibilities which necessitate their absence from the house. It is wrong, however, for the government to invent additional, artificial reasons for ministerial absences. If committees of cabinet must meet during the question period I shall not object, nor would any other member, I am sure, on this side of the house. Yet I suspect that to justify or rationalize its proposals the government may schedule cabinet meetings to take place during the question period. Perhaps I am overly suspicious, but I confess that thought ran through my mind as the President of the Privy Council was expounding his views.

Ministers of the crown have behind them all the resources of government. There are ministers without portfolio and 16 parliamentary secretaries, and there is no reason for

[Mr. Baldwin.]

not giving immediate answers to questions that are asked in the house every day. Perhaps on a matter of great importance a parliamentary secretary or acting minister may say, if the minister is absent, "We shall take the question as notice and provide an answer later".

In dealing with their responsibilities ordinary members of parliament do not have at their disposal the resources of the government. We manage to be here. We are not worried so much about the questions that are to be asked during the question period; we are concerned about the answers. We are here to ask questions.

With great sincerity I urge the President of the Privy Council and the Prime Minister to review their decision which would arbitrarily impose this new arrangement on us. The matter ought to be referred to a committee and discussed in much the same way as some hon. members, in particular the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre, have suggested other proposals ought to be discussed in committee. Then, hopefully, we may reach a plateau in our parliamentary procedure which will benefit us all. This must be done in a spirit of good will and co-operation.

No doubt the government, in trying to justify its position when it places before this house certain items of legislation or certain matters in connection with estimates, may feel that certain methods of procedure ought to be adopted. At that time the matter may be put to a vote. Nevertheless, I say to the President of the Privy Council and to the Prime Minister that in most of these areas, if there is a little give and take on both sides, we shall arrive at an arrangement that is reasonably acceptable to all members of the house.

I end by saying that the rules of the house belong to the members of the house. They are not for the benefit of the government or any political party. They belong to the private members of this house, to be of assistance in the discharging of the responsibilities which have been placed on the private members by the people of Canada. It is not good enough for the government to say: This is easier for us; therefore it must be so.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): When the hon. member speaks of private members of the house is he intimating that members of the privy council are not private members and therefore not competent to participate in the enactment of rules?