

Disclosure of Documents

agreement among hon. members, the motion of the hon. member for Bellechasse keeps its rank. I do not believe there is any problem in this regard. In any event, the hon. member being absent from the House, it might perhaps be difficult to proceed with his motion for papers.

[English]

Mr. Grier: Mr. Speaker, this order, along with a number of others of a similar nature, was proposed by me for one very fundamental reason. As a member of parliament it is my responsibility, along with my colleagues, to vote my approval or otherwise of some \$18.5 billion worth of expenditures by the federal government on the basis of information that is all too scanty and all too difficult to obtain, and to arrive at a judgment counselled by some educated information as to the nature of government programs and their value.

At the moment members of parliament basically have available to them information contained in the blue book of estimates, which is a veritable sea of figures. Perhaps a member who has been here for a generation or longer may be able to find his way through them, but most of us have not been here for that long. I feel sure that most of us encounter difficulty and frustration in trying to find information on the basis of which we can come to some kind of sensible judgment as to the wisdom of various programs and as to whether or not funds are being spent in the wisest possible way.

It is true that in recent years the presentation of the estimates has been altered somewhat, and there are now contained in that blue book program descriptions and outlines of objectives which, frankly, shed no light on the expenditure programs detailed in its pages, pages that probably were written several years ago and which are hardly changed from year to year. I had occasion yesterday in a committee meeting to be referred to one of these descriptions by the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury), and I think it was evident, as he read it out to me, how useless it would have been in answering the question I had asked; and I suspect that the President of the Treasury Board was himself privately embarrassed. The order of the House for the provision of a complete copy of the Program Forecast of this ministry, and indeed of others for which I have asked, is for the purpose of establishing some logical basis for judging the value of government programs.

Reference is made in the motion to budgets A, B and X. Not all hon. members may be aware of the meaning of these interesting designations. Budget A is the forecast expenditures of the department, taking into account those activities of an on-going nature. That is to say, if one took the activities of the previous year and attached current year costs to them, that would be budget A. Budget B contains an estimate of the costs attached to new programs and activities that the department wishes to undertake. Budget X, which perhaps would be the most revealing of all, indicates those programs which, in the judgment of the department, are of the lowest priority and might well be cut out if it were necessary to provide funds for the items referred to in budget B.

It seems to me a matter of common sense that the kind of information contained in these Program Forecasts be made available to Members of Parliament who, in the end,

[The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel)]

must give their approval or otherwise of multibillion dollar federal expenditures. If this information is good enough for the Treasury Board, I suggest it is good enough for parliament. These Program Forecasts are made available in great detail to the Treasury Board and its officials as they attempt to determine the spending priorities of the government for the coming years. Yet they are withheld from Members of Parliament.

Putting the best light upon it, one can only assume that the government feels that if such figures were made available to members of parliament we would abuse them, use them to narrow political advantage, misunderstand them, and that they would be beyond our competence to assess and therefore we had better not have them. Putting it in its worst light, this seems to me to be a deliberate attempt to withhold from parliament, which historically and traditionally is sovereign in the granting of supply, the very evidence upon which some sensible judgment could be made.

In the Program Forecasts that are made available to Treasury Board by each department, every single item of expenditure is defined in detail, justified in detail, described in detail that could turn the forest of figures in the estimates blue book into useful information. This program forecasting approach to budgeting has been established by the Treasury Board for government departments in recent years. Manuals issued by Treasury Board indicate in very specific detail how each department is to go about setting its program forecasts, thus establishing the kind of information that Treasury Board will require in order to make an assessment. It seems to me, as I said earlier, that if that kind of information is needed by Treasury Board to establish government spending priorities, then surely it is needed by, and should be made available to, members of parliament.

There has been criticism over the years of the growing difficulty that this body encounters in trying to get to the bottom of government expenditure programs. For that reason the committee system to deal with estimates has been set up, but to one who, as a new member, has had some brief experience with committee procedures the difficulty is not immeasurably reduced by the opportunity to ask questions for ten or fifteen minutes of a minister who is almost by definition doing his best to provide as little information as he possibly can.

● (1710)

Members of this party during this session have asked that evaluations of the effectiveness and efficiency of certain programs of this ministry of industry, trade and commerce be provided to the House. We were told these evaluations were going on but they have not been made available. On March 14, the President of the Treasury Board indicated in the House that virtually every department of government now has the resources to carry out evaluations of the efficiency of its operations and the cost effectiveness of its programs.

I asked the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce (Mr. Gillespie) whether that statement applied to his department. He said, in part, he was not sure whether he had any budget to enable his department to do evaluations and did not think his estimates provided for that. So,