

Control of Government Expenditures

first exposure to the proceedings of the agriculture committee, proceedings which became renowned during the period in which the committee held a birthday party with respect to one of the bills before it.

I know that if the hon. member had been given more time to expand on that theme he would join me in saying that his criticisms are not the result of any fault of the government. It is a pity that the hon. member for Crowfoot (Mr. Horner) is not in the House, because the destruction of the work of that committee is a result—an achievement, if you want to call it that—which can be laid at his feet. The blame must be laid squarely at his feet. I am sure that the hon. member, if he has the interests of the farmers of this country at heart, will be dismayed at the manner in which that man destroyed the work of the committee and made a shamble of it. And that is not the fault of the government.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Downey: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The hon. member who now has the floor has referred to the hon. member for Crowfoot (Mr. Horner). He has made some disparaging remarks about him and spoken totally from ignorance. I do not think he was present at any time when the committee met, and his knowledge of the situation in agriculture is practically zilch. Yet he stands in this House and pretends to speak from knowledge.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please.

Mr. Downey: I do not think he ought to do that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. Would the hon. member please resume his seat? The Chair appreciates the intervention of the hon. member. However, in accordance with the rules of the House the hon. member has merely raised an argument and not a point of order.

Mr. Jerome: Mr. Speaker, I did not think I would touch a nerve so easily. I thought that the gathering opposite looked hostile, but not sensitive. If I may speak to the motion before us, it seems that it was hastily drawn up. One gets the impression, from the lack of vigour that was exhibited in the earlier stages of this debate, that the official opposition must originally have chosen some other motion for presentation today. Perhaps certain events of the weekend made it impossible for them to proceed with the originally intended motion and this one had to be substituted rather hastily.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Gilbert: Would the hon. member care to go into more detail?

Mr. Jerome: I want to direct my remarks primarily to that portion of the motion which urges that Parliament take steps to exercise greater scrutiny and control over estimates and expenditures. I do not think there is any argument that general agreement existed in this House for the changes that were introduced which resulted in the elimination of the long period of time in which estimates were examined solely in committee of the whole.

It was obvious that the former procedure, by bunching up the examination of estimates so that only the estimates of a small number of departments were examined in the time available, had deleterious effects on the general examination of estimates. The first of those effects was that the estimates of a great number of departments were not examined at all, and the second was that the bulk of work involved in the examination of estimates took place at a time when it was really too late for us to be examining estimates.

The increase in workload that this was putting on Parliament was obvious for all to see. The increased spending and increased operations of government made it impossible for Members of Parliament to keep up with the work which had to be done in that field. In any event, we came to the point in committee of the whole where it was clearly not possible for us to give close scrutiny to individual items in the estimates.

When first coming to this House in 1968 I was impressed with the members of the committee on procedure who worked on the rule changes. A tremendous amount of the talent of members of opposition parties was seen on that committee. The mover of this motion was a member of that committee, as was his colleague the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) and the hon. member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather). The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), the House leader for the NDP, was a member of that committee. He has put forward an amendment to this motion. One is tempted to conclude, Mr. Speaker, that those hon. members are quick to forget. The conclusions that the committee on procedure came to in 1968 were based largely on their contributions to the committee and on their accord.

That committee reached conclusions about changes in the rules and dealing with estimates. The result is that we have dealt with estimates ever since in the way we now deal with them. The rule changes that were made permanent in 1968 as a result of the work of the committee which began in 1968 were introduced in part in this House on a trial basis in 1965. What were those changes, Mr. Speaker? First we saw the establishment of a trimester allocation of time with respect to the examination of estimates, and the adoption of Standing Order 58(14) which had the effect of referring estimates to committees by March 1, to be reported by May 31 right in the middle of the third term, so to speak.

This now means that the unfortunate timing of the examination of estimates has been as nearly as possible eliminated. Estimates are now examined during the most meaningful time of the calendar year. This change also means, Mr. Speaker, that estimates have been referred to standing committees instead of to committee of the whole House. Also, a great deal of flexibility has been introduced into the process, so that instead of examining at one time the estimates of any one department, which was the method adopted when estimates were considered in the House, it is now possible for the estimates of several departments to be examined carefully at the same time in several standing committees.

Further flexibility has been introduced into the system in that witnesses who attend committee hearings are able to testify. That flexibility certainly has been of value. This means that not only can more than one minister testify at