

Mr. MANSON (Hawthorn) - It is with some diffidence that I rise this evening to make my first contribution to the debates in this House. In the past many wise and gifted parliamentarians have served in this Chamber with distinction and for the promotion of the common good. We are fortunate to have in our midst three of those distinguished members in the persons of the honorable members for Northcote, Scoresby, and Gippsland East. When they entered this institution the system of debate differed slightly from that which now prevails; as times have changed, so has the system and the pattern of the Budget debate been completely altered. Nowadays, it falls into two distinct lines: Government members stand up and praise the Budget; Opposition members criticize it. I have no intention of doing either of those things this evening.

In studying Victorian Parliamentary history, and in trying to "wade through" the mass of Budget papers and figures, which I doubt if any member properly understands, two or three aspects have impressed me as being important. I do not intend to take up much time in discussing what I consider are the three key points in a Budget debate. In earlier days, the Budget papers were accompanied by the report of the Auditor-General. Delving into past history I have obtained some interesting figures to show that when the 1924-25 Budget was brought down on 15th October, 1924, the Auditor-General's report was presented the day before. For the year 1925--26, the Budget was presented on 22nd October, 1925, and the Auditor-General's report one week earlier. In 1926 the Budget was introduced on the 13th October, and the Auditor-General's report on 7th October. Time moves on, and systems and people change. Consequently, in 1952, the Budget was introduced on 19th August, but the Auditor-General's report was not presented to the House until 22nd December-the last day of the sitting. In other words, we have now reached that silly stage when we discuss, decide, and determine the pattern of the State's finances without having all the facts before us. I think that policy is wrong. I do not know whether the Government supports my argument, but some uneasiness appears to prevail as it is proposed to establish a Public Accounts Committee. I commend the idea - I think it is excellent, but it is a question of locking the till when the money has gone. The committee can do no better than its counterpart in the Federal sphere - the Federal Public Accounts Committee - which has simply examined a large number of witnesses, looked at numerous departmental accounts, and then has said, "Naughty, naughty; you have spent some public money unwisely. Don't do it again." As parliamentarians, it is our duty to do more than that.

We should ensure that the Auditor-General's report - we have a most competent Auditor-General who is backed by a qualified staff - synchronizes with the Budget. At one time this was possible, and I believe it would still be possible if the Auditor-General were asked to co-operate. We commend the Government on its approach to the examination of public finance, and approve of the appointment of the Public Accounts Committee. I suggest, however, that the House should persuade the Government to set up an Estimates Committee. This procedure has been followed in the United Kingdom since 1912 and it has functioned effectively. A similar system was introduced by way of an Appropriation Committee in the United States of America. Furthermore, the policy has been adopted in Canada, and it could be followed in Australian Parliaments, particularly in the Victorian Parliament. There is a tragic and clear need for the establishment of a committee of this nature, particularly as we live in times of financial stringency. In this somewhat new Parliament, there are many members with little knowledge of public finance, but they are willing, ready, and anxious to learn. They would be willing to devote time to this matter, and, under the guidance of appropriate Treasury officials, they could learn a good deal. I think it is quite fatuous for members to stand up and choose some item of particular interest to their electorates, make a hullabaloo about it, obtain some publicity, and think they have done their job. They have not. Members are here as custodians of the public purse, and can fulfil their

obligations only if they understand why all the figures appear in the Budget papers and why, as is evident from a cursory glance, expenditure on all items has been increased since last year. I do not suggest that the Public Service, the Government, or its departmental advisers are dishonest, insincere, or telling the wrong story, but I do suggest that members would be better qualified to do their duty as parliamentarians, if given the opportunity of serving on a committee of investigation to study the Estimates. At least we would know what the figures meant, and would be able to discuss them intelligently.