

BILL

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ACTION

Extension of Remarks

When Is a Budget Not a Budget?

EXTENSION OF REMARKS

OF

HON. JAMES A. FREAR,
OF WISCONSIN,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

Monday, October 20, 1919.

Mr. FREAR. Mr. Speaker, with a blare of trumpets we have unanimously passed House bill 9783, which its sponsors call "a bill to provide a national budget system." It sounded like a fierce reform, but it is as harmless and inoffensive as a totem pole. Handed to Congress by outside agencies, we swallowed this sugar-pill bill, which in no way reaches Congress or appropriation bills recommended by committees.

The bill has just passed by a vote of 285 ayes to 3 nays, according to the Speaker's announcement. Instead of a national budget system the bill simply provides an administration hobble skirt on estimates, and the hobble will be as generous in size as administration modistes choose to make it.

Its principal function is to acquaint the President with the several fashions in financial drapery possessed by his official family, but it bears no more relation to a real budget system than an umbrella bears to a flying machine. Estimates for Congress will continue to be measured by the conscience and cloth possessed by the different departmental chiefs. A comptroller general provided in the bill and appointed by the President will be expected to approve all fashions offered by the maker of comptrollers and governmental fashions. That in brief is the so-called national budget system adopted by the House.

After the administration hobble is received by Congress a dozen committee functionaries will take different portions of the gown and chuck into it as many different breadths, buttons, tucks, and furbelows as may be found desirable by these different committees. Instead of selecting one congressional committee to put the lid on expenditures and fixing responsibility on that one committee and on Congress, we are preserving the Agricultural, Post Office, Military, Naval, River and Harbor, and a half dozen other financial dressmakers, who will continue to do the trimming as of yore.

In other words, congressional arbiters of financial fashions will decide whether the new budget frock is to be restricted to economical lines or whether it will assume the proportions of a plentiful hoop-skirt creation generously cut along lines of recent war appropriations. We are told that a strait-jacket under-vest for Congress will be urged next session, changing the House rules, but it was deemed wise to put it over, presumably so that it will not conflict with the league of nations. Two large problems may well occupy different sessions, but Fitzgerald, Sherley, budget reformers, and other high legislative authorities declare Congress will never be persuaded to combine its many appropriation committees into one or to materially relinquish its present powers, so as to center all responsibility in one committee.

Those Members who by reason of seniority have risen to chairmanships or near chairmanships in the different appro-

priation committees will fight with backs against the wall for the finery and honors that go with such positions. As I said in an extended discussion of the budget on June 24, no Hottentot king or dusky senator in the far-off cannibal islands was ever more proud of his huge earrings, which ordinarily compose the major part of his full-dress garb, than are some honored members of appropriation committees who have finally reached chairmanships on these powerful committees. Generally popular and more or less able, these chairmen for years watched for the shoes of their predecessors, whose political or physical demise brought the same solace that comes to a poor relation left beneficiary under the will. Finally entrenched in power, they possess ordinary human attributes and can not willingly be expected to relinquish seniority rights reached only after years of patient waiting.

Arguments about the failure of budgets in other countries, the precious prerogatives of Congress and threatened danger to the Constitution, and glorious privileges of representatives in a free government are all endangered by again reverting to a single appropriation committee—so we are told by defenders of the present system. With highest consideration for these distinguished gentlemen personally and politically, no one familiar with the real situation is seriously alarmed over their dire predictions.

Notwithstanding every enlightened country in the world has adopted a single budget committee and that our Congress in effect possessed a single appropriation committee until Speaker Randall's time; that all political parties, answering to a popular demand, have pledged the enactment of a real budget system; that President Wilson, ex-President Taft, a high budget authority, and Uncle Joe Cannon, whose homely logic and wonderful experience are invaluable to his colleagues on this floor—notwithstanding all these recognized expressions of a large and rapidly growing sentiment throughout the country for a real national budget in Congress to put hobbles where they will hobble, yet we dodge the proposition now and put it over until next session.

Congress tells the Executive and his official family what they are expected to do; Constitution or no Constitution, when this so-called budget bill passes to-day. The people who pay the bills may well ask where the national budget system comes in when we only provide for better administration estimates and yet leave the bars down for widest congressional action when making appropriations.

We should meet the proposition squarely, adopt a single budget committee, put a curb on wasteful appropriations wherever they exist, and keep pledges made to the people, or we will be called to account for failing to control our own actions when we so readily attempt to regulate all others, from the President down to the humblest citizen. A single budget committee will not prevent appropriations or continued taxes, but it is our duty to place every barrier against waste, and that will be aided by a real budget system.