

Status of Women

Miss Jewett: I was.

● (1650)

Mr. Axworthy: There were none of the castigations, none of the insults or abuse that we have heard since then, except when the decision went against what she thought it should be. Then they became subject and victims of her wrath because they were saying at that time, "We do not have to worry, we will be vindicated." The fact of the matter is that they spent four and a half hours in secret session—secret, I guess, to all of us except to members who received some documents, which I have yet to see.

An hon. Member: All of us have them.

Mr. Axworthy: I am sure that the hon. member has better pipelines to the council than I have. Perhaps we should be asking who really is tampering with the council, because I have not seen those minutes which hon. members opposite have and, if there is political interference, then I suggest that perhaps members opposite should be asking themselves about their own role in all this business.

The hon. member for New Westminster-Coquitlam has been very quick to make personal attacks upon members of that council, to engage in a pretty intensive form of character assassination on certain of those members. That is really reprehensible, and considering the kind of reputation which the hon. member used to have in terms of being prepared to present facts and issues in a fair way, I think that the kinds of personal attacks in which she has engaged do not befit the honour and dignity of a member of this House. She is really using the privileges of members of the House to make personal attacks which, if she had made them outside this House, might have subjected her to some very serious liabilities.

An hon. Member: Sorry I get under your skin.

Mr. Axworthy: But that, Mr. Speaker, is her style, that is the way she wants to conduct her business, that is the way in which she represents herself, and that is fine.

But the fact of the matter is that the council met and decided to support the position taken by the executive committee. And again, members here have said that it was not a fair decision. They are saying in effect, "We do not believe in democracy unless it happens to go our way. We only believe in the democratic process when our side wins." I know that this has been the feeling since last February and March among members opposite, because one can still see it on the faces of some of them. They still cannot believe that democracy spoke the way it did. But the fact of the matter is that that is the way a democracy works, and people make those choices. You can make all the allegations and innuendos you want, but they were the ones who made the choice. The real regret that I have, Mr. Speaker—

An hon. Member: Is that your leadership chances are shot.

Mr. Axworthy: —is that in the kinds of charges that have been made during this debate on this whole issue by hon.

members opposite they have been far more responsible for discrediting the council, questioning its credibility and besmirching its ability to operate than anything that anybody on this side of the House has done or has contemplated doing. That is because they have used the council as their battering ram. They have tried, for their own political reasons, to use the work of the advisory council to achieve whatever political objective they have. I happen to think that the reason is that they know we are succeeding in making real reforms and changes for women and they do not like what they see. That is what really frightens them, that is what bothers them the most. They know we are making real progress in these areas and that we are going to make further progress because we have a number of other initiatives in mind. That is what gets to them really deep down, and that is what they are afraid of.

In terms of the charges that were made, I have stated in this House several times, and will continue to state, that those are the facts. I believe that it would be in the best interests of the advisory council if the issue were dealt with on the facts, not on the basis of rumour and allegations, as the hon. member for Waterloo stated, because that is the best way in which we can pay respect to that council and preserve its independence and autonomy.

I would agree that probably it is worth while to look at the structure of the council and at its role. Before hon. members say, "You are changing your tune", let me say that that is not true because, some six weeks ago, I spoke at the steering meeting of the Copenhagen conference and indicated that one of the initiatives is to take a look at the structure of the council. I had some concerns as well, and one of those concerns was raised with me by women across Canada, namely, that the council has become far too centralized in Ottawa and was not reaching out in terms of its regional grasp in providing a distribution of information and ideas.

Let us clear up some of the facts about the council. Members say that it should report to Parliament. It does report to Parliament. The reports issued by that council are public reports on the day they are issued. They do not go through me. I, as the minister responsible, exercise absolutely no judgment or control, and in fact I am not even consulted about them in most cases. All that happens is that I get my complimentary copy at the same time as hon. members opposite do. Those reports, which have provided the basis for some very harsh criticism of government activities over time, have been used by members opposite as a way of raising questions in the House. They are a very legitimate function of the council which should be protected and enhanced.

But there is also a certain value to the council having a relationship with a minister of the government so that there can be some contact and advice going back and forth, so that Mrs. Anderson, as she did at her first meeting, can sit down with me and say, "I am concerned about the problem of unemployment insurance, we would like you to make changes", and we are able to make changes. There is a certain tangible benefit in having this kind of connection.