

Refitting of HMCS "Bonaventure"

In the few moments I have left I wish to state that as long as the President of the Treasury Board has responsibility for the expending of public funds, the minister cannot expect other than condemnation by this House. My own condemnation is very strong. As long as the minister fails to act on the situation as it now exists, he cannot expect to be rid of that condemnation. In the public realm six senior civil servants have been charged. They have no recourse to defence and no recourse to a forum to which they can present their side of the situation.

I think it is regrettable that the President of the Treasury Board allowed this situation to develop. It is a matter of even deeper regret that he allowed it to continue once it became known. I think it is deplorable and unforgivable that the minister has not seen fit to take a public position either of discipline or of defence. The fact that time has passed and the minister has now assumed other responsibilities does not mitigate his responsibility. Indeed, the office which the minister now holds as President of the Treasury Board ties him closer to his initial failure to act in this regard.

Hon. Donald S. Macdonald (President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, I rise on behalf of my colleague the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Cadieux) who could not be in the House today for this debate because he is attending a meeting of the NATO nuclear planning group of which Canada again this year became a member on rotation. This group normally meets twice a year. The current meeting is being held in Venice today and tomorrow. My colleague will then proceed to Brussels to the spring meeting of the Defence Planning Committee of NATO on June 11. In his absence today on this important item of public business he has asked me to speak with regard to his responsibilities as Minister of National Defence. I welcome the opportunity to speak this evening and to set forth on his behalf his response, which I make clear I am pleased to support.

There are two points to be made before dealing with the details of the committee—report two assertions of the hon. member for Dartmouth-Halifax East (Mr. Forrestall) which should be contested. I got the impression from the hon. member for Dartmouth-Halifax East and the hon. member for Saint John-Lancaster (Mr. Bell) that there is an element of personal vendetta in their presenting this motion. The hon. member for Dartmouth-Halifax East suggested that

in some way the President of the Treasury Board could have gone into other departments to discipline employees who are not his direct responsibility. The rules of public administration are clear; they have been clear for a long time. Ministerial responsibility attaches to the specific office, the person occupying it from time to time, and not to any individual. It is the minister currently holding the office in question who answers to the House for the acts and omissions of his public officials. The matter in issue refers to acts and omissions which have occurred in the past as well as the present.

It is improper for the hon. member to say that the President of the Treasury Board is evading his duty in failing to discipline the employees of the Department of National Defence, for which department I am responding this evening, or those of the Department of Supply and Services for which my colleague will respond.

Mr. Bell: If that is the theory, you change departments if you get into trouble!

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Perhaps the hon. member was in trouble with his own party by putting this motion which appears in his name. Perhaps the hon. member for Wellington (Mr. Hales) will agree that the position of the hon. member for Saint John-Lancaster should be changed.

Mr. Bell: We do not call for resignations in our party.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): It would be improper for the President of the Treasury Board to deal with this part of the motion. It was absurd for the hon. member for Dartmouth-Halifax East to suggest that the President of the Treasury Board should go into other departments for which he does not have responsibility and engage in the disciplining of employees.

Secondly, the hon. member for Saint John-Lancaster, the hon. member for Dartmouth-Halifax East and other members commended the committee on its work in this regard. They then condemned the censuring of a number of public servants including several serving officers of the Maritime arm of the Canadian armed forces. I suggest they cannot have it both ways. If they did not wish specific individuals to be named, they could have prevented it. This committee, unlike other Standing Committees of the House, does not have a government majority.