

the morning, while the critics and a few members of the opposition meet around six o'clock in the evening for a briefing on the budget before it is brought down at eight o'clock. That is not a breach of privilege but an established practice. If, in the case of the budget, the press attends a lock-up six or seven hours earlier than the hon. members, if that is not a matter of privilege, why should it be now when the press was briefed on the estimates only at ten o'clock this morning, and the critics and a few hon. members opposite were invited for lunch by the President of the Treasury Board himself for a briefing on the estimates, which he is not required to do?

We see that, in the case of the budget, the press meets at eleven o'clock for a budget that becomes public knowledge at eight o'clock in the evening while the hon. members or a few of them are convened only at six o'clock; today, the press met at ten o'clock this morning, and the few hon. members met only two hours later, around noon or 12.30, having been invited by the President of the Treasury Board for a briefing. That is a fine example of courtesy on the part of the President of the Treasury Board, and not a matter of privilege nor a lack of courtesy; quite the contrary. So, I fail to see, Madam Speaker, how my colleagues opposite can possibly complain of any shortcoming on our part.

May I say in closing, very respectfully and unassumingly, that there is a fundamental difference between a budget and the estimates. The budget contains measures that are implemented immediately, which may justify a prior meeting with hon. members, which is not provided for in our Standing Orders, but which has become an established practice, and a precedent and which is part of our parliamentary procedure.

Moreover, the estimates do not come into effect immediately as some provisions in the budget do. Those estimates are only tabled in the House to be referred later, in the circumstances on Monday next, March 1, to the committees which during three months will examine and analyse them. The press conference was not held to deal with the estimates. The press conference was held to give newspaper men some information and enable them to write their articles in due time to appear in the news that same evening or in the newspapers the following day. The hon. members cannot complain. They will have three months to analyse and consider them in committee and discuss them during the allotted days. There will be 25 such days during the taxation year beginning after March 31.

Madam Speaker, I want to do my part as Leader of the Government in the House and support the measures helping hon. members to protect their privileges. I am fully aware of the importance of that matter.

We keep a careful watch over our prerogatives, rights, and privileges but in all sincerity I consider that in the present case, not only is there no breach of privilege, because it is not required by the Standing Orders, and I could perhaps be blamed for my legalistic approach if I restricted my comments to that, but there was no breach of courtesy for either of the

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reasons I have already mentioned. The facts are known, I shall not repeat them. Not only did we not break the rules of courtesy but we have fully respected standard parliamentary practice and even went further since the President of the Treasury Board kindly made himself available for questioning.

In a few minutes he will make a statement outlining the new format of the estimates. The hon. members opposite will have the opportunity to ask him questions during a period of time which is left at your discretion under S.O. 15(3), Madam Speaker.

This preliminary debate takes far too long, in my opinion, but since several hon. members have already spoken, I would like to correct the facts so that hon. members clearly understand that there is a difference between a private meeting with the press and a meeting with the hon. members and that we have never failed to follow the practice, or to comply with the Standing Orders or the rules of courtesy. On the contrary, we went further than we should have. I am pleased about it, and I even hope that this new practice will continue. But, Madam Speaker, I dwell on that point only to indicate that this matter is absolutely crazy.

● (1540)

[English]

Hon. Walter Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Madam Speaker, I am going to be quite brief with respect to this matter. I listened to what my hon. friend had to say, and what he is saying is that we have broken new ground. I do not really believe that we have broken new ground, since lunch, when the estimates are not seen but a press release is seen. I do not think that is breaking new ground.

If it is his intention, as the leader of the government has expressed his intention, to break new ground, then I think we have something that we might be able to work with. I want to say to him that his argument with respect to the distinction between budgetary matters, on the one hand, and estimates, on the other, is something that could be argued against if one wanted to take the time of the House to argue against it. In other words, it can apply both ways.

The fact of the matter is that over the course of the years we have expanded the rights of Members of Parliament with respect to the Auditor General's report, with respect to the budget, and what is important here is the expansion of the rights of Members of Parliament for separate briefings, not necessarily press briefings such as occurred this morning with respect to press briefings, but separate briefings, with the documents and with the advisers that are in existence for the Auditor General briefings and for the budget briefings. I do not know of any earthly reason why that principle ought not to be present. I did not find, in anything that the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) indicated, that he would be unwilling to have that kind of arrangement made.

The point of this argument, the point of my rising, is to suggest to you, Madam Speaker, that you hold this question of privilege in abeyance so that we can discuss, through the