

● (1550)

PRIVILEGE

QUALITY OF HOUSE OF COMMONS TRANSLATION SERVICES

Mr. Ernie Epp (Thunder Bay—Nipigon): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to raise a question of privilege. It is a rather different type of question of privilege which relates to the translation services required by Members of Parliament.

At the outset, I wish to note that Beauchesne's Fifth Edition elucidates the matter of privilege to which I wish to relate my comments on the services that we require.

Citation 16 states:

Parliamentary privilege is the sum of the peculiar rights enjoyed by each House collectively as a constituent part of the High Court of Parliament, and by Members of each House individually, without which they could not discharge their functions and which exceed those possessed by other bodies or individuals.

It further states:

The privileges of Parliament are rights which are "absolutely necessary for the due execution of its powers". They are enjoyed by individual Members, because the House cannot perform its functions without unimpeded use of the services of its Members;

In Citation 75 it states:

Many of the privileges of the House extend also to its committees... Committee reports and the verbatim transcripts of committee hearings are documents published under the authority of the House and are entitled to the same absolute privilege as House documents.

Noting these particular citations from Beauchesne, I wish to consider several instances that have arisen in the last months, one during the past 10 days, in which the translation services of the House of Commons and of the committees of the House have been hard pressed to fulfil their obligations, and to enable Members of Parliament to complete their work and carry out their duties.

For some time there has been concern about this issue on the Standing Joint Committee on Official Languages. As a member of that committee, I have been concerned about this issue. Last spring when the Standing Committee on Multiculturalism was hard at work on a report for which various drafts had to be considered, the provision of translation of documents into the other official language was not always available. Quite definitely that impeded the work of the committee.

During the last 10 days, as the Special Joint Committee on the 1987 Constitutional Accord was endeavouring to conclude its work and make the results available to the public in a report published in both official languages, difficulties arose in completing the work. The committee was forced to delay for one week the tabling of the report in the House.

In the course of those delays, there were reflections made upon the quality of the work. Without wishing to endorse those particular observations, which came from a member in the other place who is a very keen phraser and definer of terms, and who is very concerned about the quality of the work, let

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me say that It is quality of the work that is an essential aspect of this matter of translation services.

In the past, the question of translation services has been raised. In 1968 a Member raised the inadequacy of translation services as a question of privilege. I note in all candour that Speaker Lamoureux did not find it a *prima facie* case of privilege.

I would appreciate your consideration of this, Mr. Speaker, in your understanding and appreciation of the importance of these services. To of us who are still too close to being unilingual in English and perhaps have a greater appreciation of the importance of the Translation Bureau there is objective evidence for concern in this matter.

The Translation Bureau was created in 1934. It experienced a budget freeze during its fiftieth anniversary year in 1984. At that time there were 1,150 translators at work in the bureau. In the three years that followed there has been a decline of 150 translators who are available. That is a decline of over one-eighth in the number of persons available. In January, 1986, no fewer than 82 translators were declared surplus to the operations of the Translation Bureau.

I would submit that at that time difficulties were beginning to appear. The present difficulties, which are the basis for my question of privilege, are the end result of a decade-long process of reduction of staff and contracting out of translation work that has been going on since 1978.

Demand for translation services has markedly increased from some 254 million words annually to 320 million words. On the other hand, by 1987 the staff has declined from some 2,000 person years to 1,450 person years. That is a decline of more than one-quarter. At the same time, the volume of work contracted out has doubled to 60 million words. In comparing 60 million to 320 million words in total there is recognition of the fact that approximately one-fifth of the quantity has been contracted out. The result is that there are now some 278 contractors to whom the Translation Bureau looks for assistance.

Unfortunately, the result has been a decline in quality. Quality has been sacrificed to quantity in the enormous amount of work to be done. There is less checking of the work of the translators, which creates the possibility that our work may be immediately impeded. We will not understand the proceedings in committee and we will waste time in our deliberations. Our own words going forth may be misunderstood in one part of the country because they have been improperly translated.

The work-load that has fallen on the shoulders of the translators who remain has had a serious effect on morale. There is a resentment about the fact that their work is professional work and it has not been appreciated.

Although this is less germane to the question of privilege, the costs have been rising. In the capital area the costs of contracting out have been increasing substantially, particularly