

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we told the House of Commons and the public everything that happened in this affair and, as I said several times, the minister in question realized that his letter was interpreted as support. He immediately took action to correct the situation and we accepted this explanation. Then I personally took the initiative of asking all ministers to search their files to see if there was anything in them concerning the Radio-Television Commission, which itself asks for public opinion before rendering its decisions. Several members have written to this commission and several ministers wrote as they did when they were backbenchers. I asked Mr. Wilson to clarify the directives on this subject. I have had conversations with him and I hope that the new directives will be ready within a few weeks.

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I ask the Prime Minister if he thinks that his minister again showed his lack of judgement yesterday when he said that he felt more and more at ease, although four of the largest newspapers in Canada and Quebec are calling for his resignation.

Does the Prime Minister, who has shown the virtue of forgiveness, not consider the penitent to lack firm resolve and to be insufficiently remorseful?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Lord in Heaven decides whether someone has firm resolve, not I.

Mrs. Suzanne Tremblay (Rimouski—Témiscouata, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister. We learned that government ethics counsellor, Howard Wilson, was disciplined in 1992 for awarding almost \$1 million worth of contracts without tender. His signing authority was suspended by the Deputy Minister of Industry after the Auditor General intervened.

How can the Prime Minister think that the government's ethics counsellor still has the credibility needed to occupy his position, whose incumbent must be above suspicion?

• (1420)

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there was an investigation on this matter and Mr. Wilson's signing authority was reinstated. All I know about this man is that he is honest, competent and very open. He readily makes himself available to the media and, under circumstances like these, he gave interviews.

Before appointing him, I asked both the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Reform Party for their opinion on his ability to perform these duties; they both agreed with me that he was an honourable man and that he could do an excellent job.

Mrs. Suzanne Tremblay (Rimouski—Témiscouata, BQ): Mr. Speaker, need I remind the Prime Minister that Mr. Wilson himself admitted that he had not informed the Prime Minister of his situation before being appointed ethics counsellor in June, thus making it impossible for the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the third party to find out about the situation which Mr. Wilson was involved in.

How can the Prime Minister continue to trust Mr. Wilson, who hid his suspension when his first duty was to inform the Prime Minister of his background at the time of his appointment?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the man in question was not suspended. He kept his position. It was an administrative matter as to whether he had authority or whether he should keep it. It was found appropriate to give him back the authority he had before.

[English]

Mr. Preston Manning (Calgary Southwest, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, last Thursday, October 27, the Prime Minister said regarding the heritage minister affair: "I consulted the government's ethics counsellor and confirmed that I had made the right decision in this matter". On Friday in the House he said: "I did not speak to Mr. Wilson myself but I asked that he be consulted". Today we find out that in fact no one, neither the Prime Minister nor his staff, asked the ethics counsellor to rule specifically on the heritage minister's letter to the CRTC.

The ethics counsellor's revelations on national television this morning contradict every version of events that the Prime Minister has given us. I ask the Prime Minister: How does he explain his previous comments to the House?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I explained clearly that I had asked people to call the ethics counsellor and they called him. He gave me an opinion that did not lead me to change my mind.

The leader of the Reform Party should know that whatever advice a minister or a Prime Minister receives, that advice is for him or her. As I said, he is the one who takes full responsibility for the decision. I cannot get up in the House and say to somebody here: "I made that decision because somebody told me to do that". That is not the way it works. The Prime Minister is the one who is fully responsible. I am fully responsible for the decision I have made and I will stand by it.

Mr. Preston Manning (Calgary Southwest, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, we are asking the Prime Minister to accept responsibility for comments that he made to the House.

The Prime Minister clearly declared that the ethics counsellor had been consulted and said nothing that changed the Prime Minister's mind about his decision to retain the heritage minister. In fact, the ethics counsellor was not asked to give a ruling on that matter so how could he have provided advice to the Prime Minister on that subject?