

Oral Questions

I would like to draw my hon. friend's attention to an explanation of the viewpoint of two women who attended the minister's speech last Thursday.

[English]

Betty Granter, a provincial government clerk in Lewisporte, said: "It was nothing like what is being said. Mr. Crosbie was just joking as he always does. I think anybody who was offended by it must have a problem".

Then Mrs. Stevens said: "I guess it would be damaging if people thought on the whole that sexual harassment was a joke and people did not take it seriously, but that is not the way it was intended and that is not the way the people at the dinner in Newfoundland took it".

These are two women who were there and heard the minister speak. They have given the press and the hon. member the assurance that having been there the context was such that the minister was not in any way attempting to deride the problem of sexual harassment.

They accept the minister on good faith. Why does the hon. member not accept the minister in the same way?

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, the issue is not at this point a minister of the Crown. The issue is the fact that two ministers of the Crown have publicly spoken of hysteria and one minister has cried exaggeration around the issue of sexual harassment in the work place.

It is not simply a dinner speech that we are speaking about. It is the government's proposed changes to the unemployment insurance which will potentially touch every woman in this country.

Will the Prime Minister not take the opportunity today to clarify the government's intention around unemployment insurance and to specifically denounce the insensitive comments of the minister which leave the impression that the government sees no problem or does not treat the issue of sexual harassment in a serious way?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, my hon. friend knows full well that grounds for sexual harassment in respect of the Unemployment Insurance Commission are well covered. The women involved should and do receive full and proper protection in the law.

I know my hon. friend has been trying to change that, to distort it and to argue that is not the case. It is the case. The jurisprudence constantly supports the position of women who make these kinds of allegations and who quite properly seek the defence of the law. The question of sexual harassment that my hon. friend is trying to tie into the unemployment insurance arguments is wrong.

With regard to the statement made by the hon. minister of fisheries, he indicated in his statement that: "Those who attended the speech that I made in Lewisporte know that nothing offensive was intended". This is a statement by the minister. Women who were in the audience say very clearly not only was nothing offensive intended, nothing offensive was taken or construed by them in regard to the minister's jocular references.

From time to time all members of Parliament, perhaps spontaneously, make a statement, a paragraph or a line or two that we would like to take back because it conveys an impression that we did not really intend. But there is a sense of humour in politics that is sometimes misplaced if misconstrued.

The people in the audience said that John Crosbie was not in any way trying to do anything other than treat himself in a jocular fashion, not the question of sexual harassment. That is the difference between the women in Newfoundland who heard the speech and the position of the hon. member who today is trying to distort it.

Mr. David Dingwall (Cape Breton—East Richmond): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the right hon. Prime Minister.

When an Ottawa based magazine last year made grossly inappropriate and insensitive references to a member of the Prime Minister's family, the Prime Minister expressed—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I would remind hon. members that the test for preambles or words is whether or not on balance they create disorder. That is the test that has to be decided as to whether something is acceptable or parliamentary in this place.