

Privilege—Mr. McGrath

perpetrated against parliament. You, sir, know a lot more about the courts than I do.

● (1520)

Mr. Lang: It is not very relevant.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): There is my hon. friend, the jet flyer, saying it is not very relevant. I suggest that if a matter were being dealt with in a court and those involved went outside and made statements about it, the judge would not be very happy. If it is contempt of court if that sort of thing happens, it is contempt of this institution for the minister to take the action that he is taking tonight in Newfoundland.

As others have said, this matter has been raised repeatedly on the floor of the House of Commons. My hon. friend from St. John's East (Mr. McGrath), his colleagues on the Atlantic coast, his colleagues on the Pacific coast and my colleague, the hon. member for Nanaimo-Cowichan-The Islands (Mr. Douglas), have all been involved in this matter. It is an issue that concerns parliament. We represent the whole nation. For the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Danson) to treat us in this way is certainly a gross lack of courtesy. I can see situations in which conditions might make it necessary for a statement to be made this way, such as if parliament were not sitting or something happened over the weekend. But if the fact is that the minister is in his office here on Parliament Hill and he does not come into the chamber and make his statement to the House of Commons, that is disrespect, discourtesy, and to me it is awfully close to contempt.

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, I wish to make only one very brief argument. The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) has talked about courtesy and about respect, which are at times tangible or intangible in their operation or manifestation. The hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) has raised a question of privilege which alleges that the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Danson) has somehow breached the privilege of members of the House of Commons. Presumably, in making his argument he believes that there is an obligation on the part of the Minister of National Defence to make his statement in the House of Commons rather than in some other part of Canada.

I do not believe there is any such obligation. It is a matter of choice for ministers whether they will make a statement in the House or elsewhere in the country. In many cases I have recommended to ministers that it would be preferable for them to make statements of policy in the House of Commons rather than elsewhere, but I believe if ministers were obligated to make every statement of interest or importance in the House of Commons, to be followed by comments from hon. members opposite, it would add a very great, additional time factor to the work of the House. If there is any question about it—

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): But it takes up time to deal with questions of privilege.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

Mr. MacEachen: —may I refer to Standing Order 15(3), where the procedure is outlined under which ministers may make a statement on motions or a statement in the House of Commons. Standing Order 15(3) provides:

On statements by ministers . . . a minister of the Crown may make a short factual announcement or statement of government policy.

I think the operative word there is "may". The minister has a choice and is free to exercise that choice, taking into account a multitude of factors including respect for the House, the impact of the statement, and so on. In this particular case, in light of the clear wording of the Standing Order, I do not believe there is an obligation on the part of the minister to make such a statement in the House, and therefore I do not believe there is a valid question of privilege.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I see four other hon. members to my left wanting to contribute to the discussion. Naturally, I am not going to refuse anyone the right to participate in a discussion on a question of privilege or on any matter before the House, but I do want to caution hon. members that the question at issue is whether or not the privileges of the House have been breached. Whether or not it is desirable or contemptuous—depending on which side of the question you wish to argue—for a minister to comment in a certain way is not really relevant to the question of privilege. The question I have to consider is whether or not the privileges of the House have been breached by the failure of the minister to make a statement in the House.

If any other hon. member has something to contribute on that particular point, as opposed to criticism or otherwise of the minister's action, I would be pleased to hear them.

Mr. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, I have two brief points. The first is that of the three regions—or four regions, really—in the country concerned with search and rescue, the north is one and those services are vital to its people. So it is not really a Newfoundland problem with which this announcement is concerned.

With respect to the privilege itself, the government House leader rested his entire argument on his assertion that because Standing Order 15(3) places no legal obligation on the part of the minister to make a statement in the House, no privilege is being breached. With that I strongly disagree. There are some here who have sat through a good many parliaments, and I am one of them. It used to be common practice in the House of Commons for statements to be made on motions by ministers on matters affecting government policy of major importance. This opportunity was taken almost on a daily basis in past parliaments and it was indeed so often taken advantage of that it became a practice of the House. Certainly since I came to the House in 1957 it was the continuation of a previously existing practice that had become so deeply embedded as a practice of the House that it had the same force and effect as if it were a provision in our Standing Orders. I make the submission to you, sir, that there are privileges in this chamber that may be breached even though they may not be enshrined in our Standing Orders, and one of them is this long-standing