

Privilege—Mr. Lalonde

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lalonde: Since the House met on October 9, the question of energy has been a prominent area of concern to all Canadians, not only to people in this House but all governments in this country. What we have been getting from this government has been a consistent refusal to reply, consistent tactics of obfuscation and waffling on very simple issues. All kinds of rumours have been circulating. There have been all kinds of contacts with the provinces about what the proposals are in the area of energy. However, this House and we, the representatives of the Canadian people, have not been allowed to get from this government what its proposals are and what its scenario is.

● (1220)

As long as we are going to be treated in this House the way this government has been treating the opposition on a matter as important as energy, we will have difficulty in abiding by a situation where we can have all the questions asked but we do not get answers. We have to assume what the answer is. We have to speculate in our questions about what the government intends to do. I hope the government will heed your admonition, Mr. Speaker, and give us answers in the future.

Mr. Speaker: I hope that by my admonition in the hope of greater participation in the question period I have not opened up the opportunity to debate something which otherwise would not be debatable. In fairness, I should give one share of equal time to respond to that non-question of privilege by the energy minister or the House leader, as the case may be.

Hon. Walter Baker (President of the Privy Council and Minister of National Revenue): Mr. Speaker, I am not rising to respond because it is not within my jurisdiction, but the operation of the House is within my jurisdiction. I want to bring to Your Honour's attention a practice that seems to have developed in the House which is unfortunate. It amounts to a practice of extending the question period under the guise of a question of privilege.

Mr. LeBlanc: You should know.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): I want to bring to your attention that a question of privilege, as I understand it, involves a matter that might very well have curtailed the right of a member to speak openly in the House of Commons. A question of privilege is not a grievance. Unfortunately, we do not have a process by way of grievance.

What has happened, unfortunately, is that under the guise of questions of privilege the question period as such has in fact been extended. I do not want to curtail or even suggest that the right of appropriate free speech ought to be curtailed in any way in the House of Commons. However, and I suggest this with respect, we do not want to allow too long questions on the one hand and too long answers on the other. I accept that.

I have had discussions with Your Honour openly on the floor of the House of Commons about this. We have to be very

[Mr. Lalonde.]

careful with regard to the rules respecting the privileges of members. These rules ought not to be diluted in any way. There should not be an attempt to extend the question period in the way I have suggested by raising matters which are really grievances. This impedes the operation of the House of Commons.

One of the rights of members is to assume that question period will in fact be a question period, that members on either side will not be subject to grievance procedures by way of questions of privilege when there can be no grievance under our rules. There is a place for debate in the House of Commons. That legitimate debate will not be curtailed by effectively extending the question period.

I raise this with great respect because, frankly, as leader of the government, and I guess leader of the House of Commons, if I can say it again, I am a little concerned about the practice that seems to have developed.

I want to say on behalf of the Prime Minister (Mr. Clark), the government and members of my party that if any of us stray into overlong answers in areas where we ought not in your judgment to stray, we accept that the Chair ought to intervene in those cases. Equally, it should be incumbent upon my friends to accept that, and I am sure they accept that with respect to questions.

Mr. Lalonde: Give us answers.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): I hope that will be observed. I just wanted to give Your Honour an indication of what I believe to be the temper of the House of Commons. I sat in the opposition not too long ago.

An hon. Member: You will be back soon.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): I have experienced first hand the frustrations that can develop as a result of what opposition members traditionally allege are lack of answers. I say with respect that is not a question of privilege, nor is it a point of order. I believe we have strayed somewhat far in that. I have been watching it for the last few days and felt I should rise to make that respectful submission to you.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I think enough has been said on both sides. This is essentially a non-procedural point.

MR. ANDRAS—STATISTICS CANADA—SUGGESTION THAT ANSWER OF PRESIDENT OF TREASURY BOARD MISLED HOUSE

Hon. Robert K. Andras (Thunder Bay-Nipigon): Mr. Speaker, my question of privilege arises from part of the answer given by the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Stevens) with regard to our concern about Statistics Canada and the allegations thereto. I am not arguing on the single point where the President of the Treasury Board seemed to imply it was wrong that I had never gone to Statistics Canada, because under our regime Statistics Canada reported to the minister of trade and commerce and not to Treasury Board.