

Mr. Pinard: Madam Speaker, I regret the Leader of the New Democratic Party (Mr. Broadbent) has left the chamber because I wanted to give an answer. The hon. member asked us not to humiliate our members on the committee. That is exactly why I would not ask them to vote again on the issue. Because we respect our members on the committee, I would not make that move, and because we respect the parliamentary procedure and practice we will not interfere in the committee's right to deal with its own procedure.

That being said, I want to give the House leader of the Tory party an answer, who in my view is also a good man and a tool for a better position. He has asked me to move a motion to ask a legally constituted committee to change its mind. I will not do that. I will do what I said I would do, and that is to respect this parliamentary committee which has rendered a decision. If it wants to reconsider that decision, it may do so, but we will not interfere.

We could have chosen the route of doing nothing.

An hon. Member: That is exactly what you are doing.

Mr. Pinard: Madam Speaker, we could have chosen to let you rule on this matter, waited for your ruling and allowed the decision to stand. I have offered to talk to the co-chairmen to let them know that if they want to reconsider their decision, we will not object because the government has no position on this.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Pinard: We are not against television and we are not for television in the committee. We have always said it was up to the committee to decide on its own procedure. A decision has been made and we respect the membership of that committee. If they reconsider, we will accept their decision, whatever it is. That is what I intend to do unless the opposition objects. If the opposition objects, we will act as good parliamentarians and wait for your decision on this issue, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, the government House leader has said that the government is not going to interfere with the committee but he will talk to the co-chairman.

Mr. Pinard: If you wish.

Mr. Clark: He has said the government could have chosen the route of doing nothing. What troubles us, Madam Speaker, is that the government has chosen the route of doing nothing. One question that is open to this House is this: what will be the reaction of the Government of Canada if you persist in the decision you issued to the chairman of the special committee on the handicapped and ruled that the committee was not competent to make a decision to request radio and television coverage of that committee? That has been your ruling, Madam Speaker. If you persist in that ruling, the question then becomes, will the government act? The House leader listed five points. The fifth one had to do with whether the government would act in those circumstances, and the House leader did not answer that.

Mr. Pinard: Yes, I did.

Privilege—Mr. Knowles

Mr. Clark: What he said was they would respect that situation. He did not say what the government would do. He said earlier that the government does not intend to interfere. A failure to act on this question, where only the government can act, is to express an opinion. It has expressed an opinion against the right of the people of Canada to see and to hear what is going on in the constitutional committee in the discussion of the Constitution of Canada.

I rise to make that last point, and I apologize for the heat in making it, but I do it simply because I think there has been an attempt to suggest that a change of position has occurred when no change of position has occurred at all on the part of the government.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Speaker: I did say I would not recognize any more speakers, and then I had a series of points of order and answers to those points of order. However, I think it is time now to put an end to this debate. I will try to do my best to allow the House to come to a normal conclusion of what everyone will recognize has been a very lively debate.

On several occasions the opinion I expressed in this letter, which is referred to, has been mentioned as being a ruling, by many hon. members. I have some doubt as to whether that should be considered a ruling. I base that doubt on very common sense arguments. If I write a letter to an hon. member, I might expect that member to reply to me and disagree with some of the words I put in my letter. There could be an exchange of correspondence between myself and a member, or even the chairman of a committee. It is on that common sense argument that I am not prepared to affirm that what I wrote in that letter is a ruling. It is an opinion. If it were a ruling, nobody could refute it. Therefore, rulings have to be dealt with extremely carefully. Writing a letter is a different matter from making a ruling in the solemn House of Commons.

● (1710)

I did express an opinion; that is quite clear. I have the letter before me. I can read from it as hon. members have done. I expressed an opinion "that any committee seeking to televise its proceedings must first get the authorization of the House". I will certainly try to be consistent and stick by that opinion, but only after having considered the context and the background against which I expressed that opinion, namely, that I was answering a letter regarding a request from a committee of Parliament dealing with the handicapped and disabled, which was travelling across the country. They were asking me whether the proceedings could be televised through the device of certain hook-ups of community channels, or possibly the bicycling of tapes from that committee. There could be a context or background against which this opinion would have to be interpreted. I want to take time to do just that. I repeat, I will be consistent with the meaning, after second thought and careful reading of that letter, and of the opinion which I expressed in the last paragraph of the letter.