

Privilege—Mr. Dinsdale

With respect to the present complaint, that is, of ignoring the requirements of Section 80(1) and (2) of the Post Office Act in the tabling of the annual report, to put the matter into perspective perhaps I should read to the House parts of the section that are relevant.

● (1522)

Section 80(1) reads as follows:

The Postmaster General shall submit annually to the Governor General a report of the Canada Post Office for the preceding fiscal year, containing a statement of the gross revenue collected, the amounts paid by the Postmaster General from revenue, the amounts paid into the Consolidated Revenue Fund, the amounts paid from moneys voted by parliament . . .

Section 80(2) reads as follows:

The report referred to in subsection (1), if completed when parliament is in session, shall be laid before parliament forthwith, and if not so completed, within ten days after the commencement of the next ensuing session of parliament . . .

On May 12 I raised this question in the House of Commons. As the Postmaster General was not present in the chamber, I directed my question to the Deputy Prime Minister and President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen), and he indicated that he would look into the matter.

On May 17 the report was tabled in mimeographed form, but it was not circulated among members as is the well-established practice in respect of annual reports provided under statutory provisions.

I raised this question because we were hoping to have the estimates of the Post Office Department referred to the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications. These estimates were required for the purpose of background preparation in respect of those hearings.

The delaying of the tabling to May 17 obviously was in contravention of the requirements of the Post Office Act. I attempted to get a copy of the report. Finally the estimates were referred to the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications yesterday, at which point I was still endeavouring to obtain a copy. Finally I received a copy in the French language which did not assist in preparing for a thorough examination by the committee.

There seems to be a pattern in this regard, which is the reason I raise this issue. There is an attempt on the part of the Postmaster General to avoid a thorough discussion of postal affairs in the House. If there is one department which needs a thorough examination, surely it is the Post Office Department.

Yesterday the Postmaster General and I arrived together in the committee for the consideration of the estimates. We were there at the starting hour. He made his statement, and as is the tried and true practice from time immemorial, I anticipated, as the official spokesman on postal affairs for the opposition, that I would have the right of responding to the leadoff statement of the Postmaster General. The chairman of the committee decided against accepting that practice, and a procedural discussion ensued.

I realize this is not prescribed in the procedures and regulations, but in the 27 years I have been here, the courtesy, practice, and unwritten tradition of this House have been to

[Mr. Dinsdale.]

permit the official spokesman of the opposition to reply to the statement of a minister. A pattern seems to be developing to deny members of the House an opportunity for thorough discussion regarding the introduction of amendments to the Post Office Act, and that pattern also is carrying over into consideration at committee stage. Those of us who have had considerable experience in the examination of estimates in the committee of the whole remember that we had the privilege of examining at length the spending plans of various government departments. Also we know how restricted we are under the present procedures of allocation of time and closure which have been placed upon parliament in the past ten years.

Mr. Alexander: Plus a Liberal majority.

Mr. Dinsdale: Yes. During that time expenditures have grown astronomically. The Post Office Department is no exception, as indicated by the current deficit of over half a billion.

I should like to mention one other item. Your Honour will recall that a few weeks ago a decision was reached by the Postmaster General and the government to establish an internal committee to examine the advisability of transforming the Post Office Department into a Crown corporation. This internal committee is to be made up representatives from the Post Office Department, Treasury Board, and the Department of Labour. An announcement of that importance should have provided an opportunity for response from the opposition. To avoid such a response, the announcement was made outside the House of Commons in a special press conference.

All of these circumstances build up to what I think is a justifiable question of privilege. If Your Honour rules that a specific question of privilege has been established in the remarks I have made this afternoon, I intend to move a motion which will ask that both the issue of the postal rate increase and the issue of the delayed tabling of the Post Office Department report be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pinard : Mr. Speaker, in view of the fact that the Postmaster General, for an excellent reason, cannot be in the House to reply, I would respectfully ask you to reserve his right and defer the debate on that question of privilege until his return to the House tomorrow or early next week.

[*English*]

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Certainly that would be the normal course. I am sure the Postmaster General (Mr. Lamontagne) would want to respond. Perhaps we are into an argument concerning a breach of the law. I am not so sure whether that results in a breach of our privileges. In any case, I should like to examine carefully the arguments of the hon. member, because he extended the matter beyond a mere breach of the law and into a pattern of conduct at which I want to look. In any event, I should like to hear the interven-