

Privilege—Mr. Huntington

What could there conceivably be in the estimates to make secrecy more necessary than in the case of a budget? What justification could there be for denying people the right of access to information about the estimates when we accept as a matter of common procedure that they should be entitled to have information in advance with regard to the budget?

My colleague, the hon. member for Capilano, mentioned as well the long-standing tradition whereby Members of Parliament for all parties are allowed into a lock-up with the Auditor General prior to the tabling of the Auditor General's report to be briefed as to the findings which will be presented in Parliament. Surely that is appropriate as well. To the best of my knowledge, there has never been an instance where the security surrounding a lock-up and the privilege granted to Members of Parliament has been abused. I cannot think of an instance where a leak has taken place.

Mr. MacEachen: I can.

Mr. Beatty: Nor can I think of a single instance where, in the case of a lock-up on the budget, there has been a leak as a result of a Member of Parliament being there to hear about it in advance. Surely this same courtesy should and could have been extended in this case to Members of Parliament.

It is not simply a question of Members of Parliament being over-sensitive about their prerogatives. If that is what it was, I do not think that any member on this side would expect you to have sympathy. The issue is how we represent our constituents. How are the people of Canada best served? Are they best served by a procedure which excludes Members of Parliament, which feeds them steak and mushrooms and press releases over lunch at the same time as the press is receiving a full briefing about information which is being withheld from Parliament? Or is it in the interests of Canadians that Members of Parliament, who will be called upon very shortly to respond to the President of the Treasury Board and ask him questions in this House relating to his estimates, be given the opportunity of having some advance guidance from the department as to the substance of that information?

As a former minister, I feel there is nothing more complicated which comes before Parliament in the course of a year than the estimates. It is not good enough for a Member of Parliament charged with the responsibility of responding on behalf of his party to the government's spending plan to simply receive a press release. Surely he is entitled to full information and to have his questions answered by the officials and the minister in the very same way as are members of the press.

Finally, I repeat that we are not objecting in the least to a lock-up for the press in order that they can get this information. We are saying if it is essential for the press to have access to this information, in order for them to do their job, then Members of Parliament serving their constituents and the people of Canada deserve no less.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Yvon Pinard (President of the Privy Council): Madam Speaker, in my opinion the facts are relatively simple.

In this instance members of the opposition want to enjoy the same consideration as the press, but everything has to be set in proper perspective. First we must find out if there was a breach of the standing orders and of the established tradition before deciding whether or not in this case there is a question of privilege or a simple lack of courtesy.

I suggest there is neither. In my opinion the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) is being very humble when he says that out of courtesy perhaps he could have done more than he did today. Let me explain. First as regards the rules, S.O. 58(14) and 59 set forth the obligations of the government as they relate to the main estimates. All we need do under the provisions of S.O. 58(14) is to ensure that these estimates are tabled in the House before March 1 so that henceforth, through a motion moved under S.O. 59, they may be referred to the various appropriate committees which must report at the end of May. Therefore hon. members opposite and on this side will have three months to scrutinize, study and analyze these estimates.

That being the case, Madam Speaker, it seems obvious to me that the President of the Treasury Board did not in any way breach the standing orders of the House and no other rule exists under which he would have to serve notice or in any way whatsoever consult members opposite about the estimates. Therefore we religiously followed Standing Orders 58(14) and 59 without breaching the privileges of hon. members. Since the Standing Orders were respected, did we fail to follow our tradition or practice? When introducing the main estimates in years past, of course out of courtesy for newsmen, because of their obligation to go to press before a set time, they attended a lock-up to get acquainted with the estimates, but such was not the case for hon. members. So there is no precedent which members opposite can cite to say that today, in 1981, we are not observing a practice for that practice does not exist, and that has not been demonstrated by anyone here today. Besides, I think we started something new because the President of the Treasury Board was thoughtful and courteous enough to invite critics of the opposition parties for lunch to brief them on these estimates. That has indeed been confirmed by opposition members, they had that meeting beginning at lunch hour until the estimates were tabled, even if it was not necessary.

Now then, Madam Speaker, it is enough to compare what was done today with the procedure followed in the case of the budget, although there is a basic difference on which I will elaborate later. In the case of the budget, and it is not all that different, my colleagues opposite will admit that the critics and a few members of the opposition do not meet at the same time as the newsmen. That is false.

In the case of the budget, things are not much different: my colleagues opposite will agree that the critics and a few members of the opposition are not invited to meet at the same time as members of the press. That is false! In the case of the budget, the press is admitted for a lock-up at eleven o'clock in