HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, June 3, 1969

The house met at 2 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. SALTSMAN—REQUEST THAT POLITICAL PARTY REPRESENTATIVES ATTEND AT ADVANCE BUDGET BRIEFINGS

Mr. Max Saltsman (Waterloo): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege related to the rights and responsibilities of members of this house which are being usurped by a practice existing for many years between the government and the news media people on budget night.

Prior to the budget being presented at eight o'clock this evening by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Benson) there will be a secret and confidential briefing to the press people on the budget statement and proposals. Mr. Speaker, I should say that there is no question of a breach of information or any leaks taking place during this period between six and eight o'clock, since the members of the press are locked in and are not released until the minister commences his statement in the house at eight o'clock.

Last October a request was made to the office of the Minister of Finance regarding the participation of a representative of this party in the budget briefing. This request was turned down due to time considerations and other factors related to precedent. It was stated that this matter would be reconsidered, with possible participation in such press briefings by representatives of each of the opposition parties for the next budget.

We have again made this request and again it has been refused. It is for this reason that I raise this matter now for your consideration. Because of the time element involved, because of the necessity for spokesmen of the opposition parties to comment on the budget I think it is important that we be accorded the same information, the same privileges as the press, through an appointed representative at the briefing. I am prepared to move a motion, Mr. Speaker, if you accept this question of privilege.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for Waterloo (Mr. Saltsman) according to requirements of the Standing Orders gave notice to the Chair of his proposed question of privilege. This has given the Chair an opportunity to review the situation and consider whether there is a prima facie case of privilege.

The hon. member claims that the decision of the Minister of Finance (Mr. Benson) to deny party representatives access to advance budgetary briefings is a breach of parliamentary privilege. As hon. members are aware it is a long established practice that budgetary information is made available to the press some hours before the same information is made available to the house. That is always done, I understand, under the terms of the strictest secrecy.

The suggestion of the hon. member for Waterloo is that if such advance information is available to the press, party officials and other individuals representing members of parliament are entitled to the same advantage. The objection taken by the hon. member to past procedure as it has existed is, of course, of great interest.

There are really two aspects to the problem. The first is whether there should be advance information at all, even to the press; then if that practice is accepted, and continued as it has been in the past, whether this advance budgetary information should be limited to a specific group.

The first aspect of the problem has been raised on a number of occasions, particularly in January, 1961, when Mr. Speaker Michener was called upon to make a ruling on a similar question. The Speaker then said:

> I do not find a prima facie right on the part of the house to insist that the government, when it tables the full information shall not give a summary of it to the press—

I would be inclined to come to the same conclusion in the present circumstances.

While it may well be that the whole practice should be reviewed by the executive or by members, I doubt very much if the way to have or conduct such a review is by way of a specific question of privilege of the type raised by the hon. member for Waterloo.

• (2:10 p.m.)

In the circumstances my suggestion is that the matter be given some thought perhaps for