

Point of Order—Ms. Copps

What are the questions that the Government has asked the Speaker to transform to Notices of Motions and consign therefore to oblivion? I might add that the questions come from all political Parties and seek information on matters such as government assistance to oil companies, transportation of hazardous waste, government funding through Canadian Jobs Strategy, the origin of fruit purchased by the federal Government, tax concessions for companies, and tax exemptions for business contributions to free trade advertisements that we see in newspapers.

Why does the Government not want to tell us how much money it has put into oil exploration? Why does the Government not want to tell us how many applications it has received and approved for Canadian Jobs Strategy programs in Ontario? Why does the Government not want to tell us where it buys its fruit? Why does it not want to tell us how great the tax expenditures were for business promotion of the free trade deal?

I suggest that Your Honour should very quickly, very strongly and irrefutably refuse this particular request coming from the Government. The Chair has already recognized the importance of these questions.

On May 18 of this year, Mr. Speaker, you suggested that those who were in the service of the public in preparing answers to the questions should recognize that the 45-day request rule does not just hang there without purpose. Transforming the questions to Notices of Motion will create a literally infinite delay.

Mr. Speaker, you also went on to say:

For the most part, there is no real reason in the world why these answers cannot be given. As I say, I cannot order them to be given because I do not have the power.

What I would like to add is that Your Honour does have the power to refuse to grant the Government's unreasonable request to transform these very legitimate questions into Notices of Motions, thereby consigning them to oblivion. If the Speaker allows the transfer of these questions to Notices of Motions for the Production of Papers, then Your Honour will be establishing a very sad and dangerous precedent. Granting the Government's request will destroy many of the gains we have made under parliamentary reform. It will take us back to the old days when questions sat on the Order Paper, and was ineffective way for Members of Parliament to obtain legitimate information and important data.

I suggest that the questions that the Hon. Member for Peace River brought to your attention and asked for your consideration on are important questions. They are legitimate questions. They seek very important information. I trust that you, Mr. Speaker, will respect the views of Parliament when it adopted parliamentary reform which, of course, encouraged the Government actually to answer Order Paper questions.

I trust that Your Honour will rule against this request. I recognize that on occasion the Government might encounter a question that would require an extremely detailed response, or perhaps one that would be more appropriate for debate. On those few occasions rather than ask Your Honour to rule, in a sense co-opt the Chair in this decision-making, which I can see would open up an incredible Pandora's box of problems when it comes to responding to questions, the question could be placed before the House Leaders. House Leaders, being honourable men and women, would very quickly determine that this was in fact a question that could be transferred legitimately and be better put for debate in the House.

I suggest that there is a vehicle that can be used on the rare occasion when transferring these questions would be required. That is to say, consent of the House Leaders to proceed by having them moved with the appropriate order of the House. Until that takes place, I think we are opening a very dangerous precedent here if we allow this particular process to be accepted.

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak very briefly on the matter in support of my colleagues' opposition to the Government's move to stifle the very appropriate vehicle of Order Paper questions.

Some of us who are in Opposition understand that there are very few ways that we can get information from Governments. I think it would be fair to say that Question Period is the vehicle to raise issues. If we want to get specific information, then Order Paper questions are one way of doing that.

For example, I have an Order Paper question which I tabled on April 20 which deals with the issue of the importation of hazardous wastes into Canada. I wanted specific information in relation to the number of tonnes of hazardous waste because I suspected, before any story appeared in the newspaper, that we were into a problem area. I think that this information is of a non-partisan, non-controversial nature, which would assist me in doing