

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister.

On Friday, when responding to incredibly insensitive comments made by a minister of the Crown on sexual harassment, the Acting Prime Minister said the minister would issue a clarification.

That afternoon the minister did indeed clarify his comments. He denounced the "false hysteria and exaggerations that are raised about these issues". That did not surprise us, but what did surprise us was a defence of the minister mounted by a second minister, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, who stated: "This exploitation of this remark he made is really unfortunate. He has a superb record of action inside and outside the cabinet. On behalf of women in Newfoundland there has been a no stronger advocate than Mr. Crosbie".

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Ms. Copps: What action does the Prime Minister intend to take to send a clear message that every member of his cabinet takes the issue of sexual harassment very seriously?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, my hon. friend is quite right. The issue of sexual harassment is a most serious one and we view it very, very seriously.

I think the legislative record of the government, the attitude of the government, are probably the very best indication of that, for example, be it in violence against women, the panel on the violence against women and new programs; be it action by the government in terms of the appointment of women to key decision-making positions of authority never held before such as in the justice department; the appointment of record numbers, by way of illustration, of women to the federal judiciary: when this government was sworn in there were 37 members of the federal judiciary and there are now 112, an increase of 300 per cent.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Oral Questions

Mr. Mulroney: I should tell my hon. friend in all seriousness that everyone views this matter with the importance that it deserves.

In the ministry over the years, as justice minister by way of illustration, no one has provided stronger leadership and greater commitment to the genuine problems confronting women than the then Minister of Justice who is today the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans for Canada.

My hon. friend knows as well as I do that the minister, along with all of us from time to time, in an attempt to be humorous might say something that somewhat out of context could be misconstrued.

• (1420)

The hon. minister has assured the House this is not the case and his heartfelt commitment to the well-being of women and against any sexual harassment is something I would hope my hon. friend would accept on its merits.

[Translation]

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton-East): Mr. Speaker, the problem of sexual harassment is a very real one, and in this case has a direct bearing on the government's policy on unemployment insurance. Unfortunately harassment is kept going by the silence and the denial that surround it. The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans makes jokes and his colleague the Minister of External Affairs congratulates him.

The Prime Minister's refusal today to disavow categorically his minister's unacceptable remarks contributes, unfortunately, to tolerance of sexual harassment.

Will the Prime Minister today publicly condemn the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans for the degrading remarks he made about victims of sexual harassment?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, sexual harassment deserves to be taken very seriously indeed, but even so I think my hon. friend is going much too far in her remarks about the minister.

I told the House that the minister had throughout his career displayed a serious commitment to promoting the status of women in Canada—appointing women to the federal courts, for example, to ambassadorships, to deputy ministerships. There were seven such women when this government took office, now there are 21, and there are other examples. I believe this is proof of a very deep commitment to the importance of the issue that has been raised.