

Business of the House

That this House make available to the Auditor General such resources as are necessary for the fulfilment of his legislative mandate.

Mr. Speaker: The Chair has now heard from the hon. members who have given notice under the terms of Standing Order 17. I am not sure whether the President of the Privy Council indicated earlier that he wanted to make some comments from a strictly procedural standpoint. If he is prepared to do so, this is as far as the Chair would be prepared to go. I will hear the minister and then take the matter under advisement.

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, if I had been shaking in my boots at the possible damage to the government which might be inflicted by this issue, I have been totally relieved by the contradictory and discordant effort which has been made on the part of the opposition to find ways of attacking the government and of attempting to solve the problem.

The Conservative party alone has three different proposals as to the manner in which the House ought to deal with what is claimed to be a question of privilege. The hon. member for Peace River says: take the Auditor General to the bar of the House. The hon. member for Annapolis Valley says: apologize, Prime Minister. The hon. member for Egmont has unleashed an unfocused chorus of vocal frustration, ending by letting the cat out of the bag and placing an ordinary substantive motion before the House. If there was any doubt whether this matter involves privilege it has been clearly dispelled by the motions which have been proposed. At least three of them are substantive motions which can only be heard upon normal notice being given and which do not raise any question of privilege at all.

The hon. member for York South proposed that this matter go to a committee. He made a reasonable defence of that proposal. He wanted a deep examination of the facts. He wanted, really, to know whether there was justification for the complaints which have been made by the Auditor General. He must, at least, have an open mind because he wanted to have a complete examination carried out by a standing committee.

His deskmate, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), really did not accept the lead of his leader. He favoured a modified version of the Peace River proposal. He said: Come to the bar, Auditor General, but please come; we do not order you to come but come at our gentle invitation.

The question of legality has been raised. A number of the comments made suggested that the question of privilege rested on words uttered by the Prime Minister yesterday. My foundation for that statement is the particular comments made by the hon. member for Annapolis Valley and the words used in the motion of the hon. member for Peace River. The matter has been alluded to less directly by other hon. members. I would resubmit my argument that if the words uttered by the Prime Minister involved a matter of privilege then the matter ought to have been raised instantly. In fact, it was—almost—raised instantly by the hon. member for York South. And it was disposed of by the House.

[Mr. MacDonald (Egmont).]

Mr. Speaker: I have to interrupt the minister for a moment. I believe the hon. member for Cape Breton-East Richmond wishes to rise on a point of order. I hope we can resolve this matter without too many points of order and further questions of privilege.

Mr. MacInnis: Mr. Speaker, I raise the same point of order as the leader of the House tried to raise earlier in the debate. My point of order can be substantiated by your own remarks as recorded in *Hansard* when the Prime Minister and the hon. member for York South were engaged in an exchange in the House. The Prime Minister definitely said that the hon. member for York South was twisting his words and you, Sir, made at that time no ruling on a question of privilege but asked the hon. members, as you will see from the record of the House, to avoid any further exchanges on the basis that they were not contributing anything to the debate. There was therefore no ruling on any question of privilege yesterday.

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps we might try to make further progress. We have been engaged on this matter for over an hour now. I would hope we might go on soon with the business of the House on the understanding that I will take into consideration all the points which have been expressed, including the point of order raised by the hon. member for Cape Breton-East Richmond.

• (1510)

Mr. MacEachen: Mr. Speaker, I was stating that if the comments made by the Prime Minister were complained of, then under the rules it was the obligation of hon. members to raise the matter at that time. In fact the hon. member for York South did raise the matter under a question of privilege. So it is my submission it would not be possible to raise that matter again at this time under the guise of privilege. As a matter of fact, my position is supported by what happened earlier in the week and particularly by the question the hon. member for Calgary Centre (Mr. Harkness) addressed to the Prime Minister on March 6, 1972, as recorded at page 541 of *Hansard*. The hon. member for Calgary Centre put this question:

Mr. Speaker, may I direct a question to the Prime Minister. Since the Financial Administration Act provides that the report of the Auditor General shall be laid before the House of Commons by the minister on or before December 31 or, if parliament is not then in session, within 15 days after the commencement of the next ensuing session, and since this is the eighteenth day of the present session, why has this report not been laid before parliament. What excuse, if any, is there for this breach of the law?

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. MacEachen: So, the first reference—

Mr. Harkness: Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I wonder whether it is the intention of hon. members that we should have a debate for the rest of the day on this subject. If we are to pursue points of order and questions of privilege, that might be the easiest decision to make. I think we should try to bring the matter to an early conclusion. We have heard from hon. members. The President of the Privy Council should