

Privilege—Mr. J. Turner

Mr. Speaker: The Hon. Member for Carleton—Charlotte (Mr. McCain), on a point of order.

Mr. McCain: Mr. Speaker, I take umbrage at the remark of the Hon. Member. Individuals who might be persuaded to participate in the political process in any way should not be subjected to the accusation that it is being done only for personal benefit. The Hon. Member's remark is improper. It is critical of individuals who have no opportunity to defend themselves. In the face of such accusations, who would want to participate in an advisory capacity to governments in any way, shape or form? This is a rank case of impropriety on the part of a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Cassidy: Mr. Speaker, it is an impropriety on the part of the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson). That is the problem before us right now.

In response to the comments made by the Hon. Member—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The Hon. Member for Ottawa Centre (Mr. Cassidy) has drawn to the attention of the House his concerns about some individuals who are acting in an advisory capacity to the Government of Canada and the Hon. Member has indicated that, as much as is possible in this place, unless it is very much in the public interest, there should be no aspersions cast on the motivation of those who are in a position of assisting the Government of Canada.

The Chair has noted the point, and I would ask the Hon. Member to be careful.

At least one of the individuals concerned has made it quite clear that he looks upon the information gained as providing some kind of an advantage in the world in which he moves. However, I would ask Hon. Members to avoid that aspect of the matter.

The point that the Chair has to decide is whether or not there has been a breach of privilege. While some of the comments are of interest and may be matters of considerable concern in another context, I would ask Hon. Members to concern themselves with the matter of privilege only.

As the Hon. Member for Windsor West (Mr. Gray) has said, the finding on a question of privilege is a difficult one for the Chair. However, it is that which I have to decide. I know that the Hon. Member for Ottawa Centre will assist me in that regard.

Mr. Cassidy: Mr. Speaker, the point that should be made is that when we look at questions which might involve conflict of interest, it is not a matter of proving that a conflict exists; rather, we need to prove only that there is the appearance of conflict.

What we have to decide here is whether there is the perception that there can be some potential advantage in the hands of someone in the private sector. That is a matter on which you, Mr. Speaker, will have to reach a judgment.

I should like to speak for a moment about the question of process and about how, as the complexity of legislation increases, it is possible in fact to deal with a question like this.

If the Minister of Finance felt he wanted to get a device from the private sector, it seems to me that he did have some avenues open to him which would have avoided the charge of breach of privilege which has been made in this House today.

For example, he could have raised this matter with the House Leaders in order to get all-Party consent to a procedure whereby certain people from outside government, people with technical or other forms of expertise, could have been consulted. That, unfortunately, was not done.

As well, he could have raised the matter with the Finance Committee. He could have sought the advice of the Finance Committee, explaining to the committee what he wanted to do and why he wanted to do it. He could have cited the problems experienced in 1981 by the then Minister of Finance, whose proposals, on being made public, were found to be unworkable and unacceptable. He could have sought the advice of the Finance Committee on proposals to avoid a recurrence of that type of outcome. As a member of the Finance Committee, I can tell you that that was not done.

It is, of course, open to the House, through resolution or other means, to agree to change what have been the accepted practices in the past. It is regrettable, in my opinion, that the Minister of Finance did not seek such a resolution.

One recalls what happened in 1963 when the then Minister of Finance brought down a dramatic Budget, a Budget which incorporated a number of very substantial changes designed to reinforce Canadian nationalism. In formulating that Budget, the then Minister of Finance had the aid of "the four wise men" as they became known. These were experts from private sector accounting and tax law firms who were brought in to assist the Minister.

You will no doubt recall, Mr. Speaker, that the Official Opposition of the day, the Progressive Conservative Party, was extremely critical of the fact that those persons had been bought in. The view was expressed that, regardless of the fact that they had taken an oath, they had confidential information.

To what extent the precedents have changed between then and now, I am not sure, but it seems to me that when there is room for legitimate doubt and question, as there most definitely is in this case, the Minister of Finance ought to take the necessary steps to gain consent.

Had our consent been sought, we might have suggested that in addition to consulting with tax lawyers and accountants the Minister might have sought the views of farmers, of fishermen, of the small business community, of women, of immigrants, and others. All sectors of society are affected by potential tax changes. Rather than confine the consultation to the *in camera* type of consultation that it was, the confidential consultation that it was, the Minister might have consulted more widely.