

*Alleged Leak re New Airport Site*

Accordingly, the number of people in the publicity firm and at the television stations involved in these preparations was kept to an essential minimum. The advance video recordings were made on Saturday and Sunday, March 22 and 23, because studio time was available and because this was also the most convenient time for ministers to carry out the recordings.

While the government took an advance decision to make certain contingency preparations for the release of information, a firm decision on the site of the airport was not reached until the cabinet meeting on March 27. Prior to that meeting, there had been a request on the part of the Quebec government for further meetings, and the federal government indicated its willingness to enter into such discussions, noting that the matter was to be discussed at the cabinet meeting on Thursday, March 27. As it turned out it was not possible to arrange a mutually convenient time.

During the cabinet meeting on March 27 there was a special technical briefing regarding the relative merits of the various sites under consideration, and later in the morning a decision to select a site was taken. Following this the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) communicated with Prime Minister Bertrand to let him know that a decision had been taken and asking him to receive a special courier carrying a letter which set out in detail the consideration which had prompted the federal government's decision.

As members are aware, the government's decision was announced to the house shortly after its opening Thursday, March 27. As soon as this was done expropriation papers were filed in the province of Quebec. Once again, as a contingency measure, it had been essential to have these papers in the hands of our own local representatives so that notice of expropriation could be filed immediately after the government's decision had been announced.

In order to ensure that the government was prepared to act on an expropriation immediately upon the public announcement of the sites, expropriations were made ready well in advance of the final decision. Plans were prepared for the more favourable contenders for the final selection. This obviously represents enormous duplication of effort. However, this duplication of effort in advance of the decision led directly to time saved following the decision. We were prepared to act on the basis of a cabinet decision for any of the more favourable sites.

Notwithstanding all precautions and secrecy one might still insist that a leak was possible during the final few days prior to the submission of the expropriation documents. I was advised however that even if a leak of this nature should occur, it would not affect the price of land. The price on expropriation is established on the basis of sales, over a period, of equivalent land in the area. It is not determined by isolated transactions shortly before the expropriation. Therefore a speculator could not make any profit from a last minute purchase. Accordingly, while on principle we took every reasonable precaution to preserve secrecy right to the last moment, no possibility of last minute speculative profits existed in any event.

In general I am satisfied that all possible security measures were taken and that in no sense has there been a breach of cabinet secrecy. While certain advance preparations were undertaken so that the public could be fully informed on a matter of such great importance and where technical considerations were paramount, those involved in these advance preparations were fully aware that no final decision would be taken by the cabinet until immediately prior to the government's announcement. Thus it was always possible that the advance material would not have been used had the government for one reason or another decided not to go ahead on the basis of the recommendations made to it which were based essentially on technical rather than political considerations.

● (2:20 p.m.)

In summary, Mr. Speaker:

1. The consultative process, essential for an objective decision, by necessity involves great numbers of people from many levels of governments and federal government departments.

2. All practicable secrecy and precaution was maintained during this process.

3. The government had to prepare in advance its plans for action to follow the site announcement. The expropriation notices were in fact filed within minutes of my announcement in the house.

4. Even if a leak had taken place in the final few days it would have been virtually impossible for anyone to realize speculative profits.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean Marchand (Minister of Forestry and Rural Development): Mr. Speaker, as