

Ministerial Responsibility

When I first came here some years ago, there was a notion about Ottawa that the real government was the public service. There was the notion that it was the deputy ministers who ran things, that even if there was a change of government, some of the same policies would be carried forward. I saw that happen. I saw governments change. The departments of government continued to give the same advice, and what might have been brought forward had the previous government stayed in office was brought forward by the new government. When this present government came in in 1968 under the present Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), we were told that it was a new era. From here on in, the decisions were going to be made by the cabinet. There are indications that to some extent the present government has carried out that position.

Deputy ministers have been moved from one department to another. Shifts have been made so that senior public officials do not get into positions of too much power. All of this has seemed to be part of the implementation of the present government's philosophy that the government should be controlled and run by the elected ministers, not by public servants at any level.

The government has made it clear that they have a tremendously valuable and efficient public service and that their advice is very important to them, but that in the final analysis, it is the government, the cabinet, those who have been elected to office, who have the say. I submit that a government that has taken that position has even more responsibility than some earlier governments which did not take that position, to stand by the principle set out in this motion, namely, the principle of ministerial responsibility.

It is inevitable, in a debate of this kind, that reference is made to the action of the Minister of Supply and Services (Mr. Goyer) when he stood in his place in this House on a question of privilege or on a ministerial statement and condemned one of his senior public servants. I suggest that the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton was quite justified in condemning that action outright, as he has done. Just as I do not like the way in which Mr. Stopforth was castigated and pilloried, so I do not intend to spend time castigating or pillorying the Minister of Supply and Services. Nevertheless, the principle which is brought into focus by this incident is certainly one concerning which there should be a clear statement by whichever of those ministerial orators is to reply in the debate today.

● (1630)

As I understand it, Mr. Stopforth is not the deputy minister in the department. He is not the assistant deputy minister. He is three, four or five rungs down the ladder. I do not know how much contact he had in a direct way with his minister. But, surely, for the Minister of Supply and Services, when the government has found itself in an awkward situation, to stand in the House and name him and blame him for the mess and, in effect, ruin his professional career, does not sit well with the position the government has taken with regard to its own authority and responsibility.

I am one who thinks we are served by a very efficient public service. When, on a recent occasion, it was attacked in this House, I felt I could not keep my seat; I had to stand

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

up and say it as I see it. However, I realize that even the most efficient group of men and women is made up of persons who can make mistakes. We all do so from time to time. A couple of us had to get up in the House yesterday and admit we make mistakes. We admitted it and took the blame for it. A senior public servant, or a public servant a little down the ladder, can make a mistake. Maybe it happens in circumstances when something has to be done. Maybe he should be suspended, or called in on the carpet or, in an extreme case, dismissed. But for a minister to name him publicly in the House of Commons, where the minister has immunity and the public servant cannot reply is, I think, deplorable.

In doing this, the minister is trying to say, "It is not my fault. We came to power prepared to take responsibility and make decisions, but now we have goofed and I say it was not my fault; we are placing the blame on somebody else." I shall not go back to my old profession and preach a sermon, but there is a story in the Old Testament about a golden calf. When Moses came down from the mountain and found that the children of Israel had created this golden calf despite his objection to idolatry, the answer was, "We do not know how it happened. We just put in the gold and out came the calf." This is one of the classic examples of failing to take responsibility.

Yet the Minister of Supply and Services is a member of a government which said things had changed, a government whose attitude was: We are in charge now. We are not letting the public service run things; we are taking the responsibility. Thus, I think the idea the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton had when he put down this motion for discussion, anti-climactic though it may be today, was a good one and I hope that whichever of the two ministers over there is to reply will take the matter seriously.

The hon. member for Grenville-Carleton and I do not mind being demolished in debate. That is part of the game. But it is not hon. members who are to be demolished. It is an issue which has to be faced, and I hope that whoever replies on behalf of the government will face that issue. It seems to me the best thing that could come out of this debate would be for a minister to say, "Yes, this should not have been done. It was wrong, and as far as the government is concerned it will not happen again."

I do not see how anyone could fail to agree with the first part of the motion which calls attention to the convention of ministerial responsibility. I trust that principle will be endorsed this afternoon. Since ministers over there have faces to save, they will no doubt dislike the latter part of the motion which calls on the House to express its lack of confidence in the government. However, I can tell hon. members opposite that the House is only being asked to express a view which is widely held in this country. Indeed, I believe it is held by a very large majority of the Canadian people. It was a long and sorry list the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton brought to our attention. I might mention some of the items, though I shall not do so in any detail. There was the dredging scandal, the judges' affair, the Sky Shops situation and, finally, the Orion debacle resulting in the loss of \$16 million because of fumbling which was the responsibility of the government. It may be that the Orion affair is not over even now,