

Point of Order—Mr. Riis

The Government is exploiting an archaic Standing Order, Standing Order 39(6), which was adopted by the House as a remedy to a problem that does not exist today. This Order was adopted in 1906 because too much House time was being taken up with oral reading of answers to questions on the Order Paper. While Mr. Speaker has asked that the Annotated Standing Orders not become the text of House discussions on procedure, it is worth noting the detailed history given of the evolution of this and related Standing Orders.

Clearly it was at that time in the interests of safeguarding House time and not of protecting the Government from embarrassing questions, that the House adopted this motion. There was a cumbersome and time consuming process at that time and Members felt this was an appropriate way to streamline the operations of the House yet permit the answers to flow to Members of the House.

Today, Questions on the Order Paper take up very little House time. Anyone reading *Hansard* and trying to compare it with what they see on the parliamentary channel would be very confused. For example, yesterday's *Hansard* reports that the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mrs. McDougall), the Minister of the Environment (Mr. L. Bouchard), and the Minister of Transport (Mr. B. Bouchard) were in the House providing long and detailed answers to written questions. In fact, as those who watched the proceedings know, within the space of a few seconds several pages of "oral answers" were provided by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Government House Leader. Questions on the Order Paper took hardly any time at all during the day.

It is also interesting to note that this Order has only been invoked once, that is in 1923 when the then Government of the day effectively refused to answer a question about trips taken abroad by Ministers and the cost to the taxpayers of those trips by asking the Speaker to convert the question into a Notice of Motion.

Why has the Government revived this archaic House rule after 65 years of disuse? I submit it is because it does not want to answer certain questions. By having questions transferred to Notices of Motions for the Production of Papers, it knows, as we all know, that the questions are destined for likely oblivion.

If the Government wanted to answer the questions it would do just that, either in a straightforward manner or by converting them to Orders for Return and tabling the return, as we saw yesterday in terms of very detailed answers.

The Speaker is well aware that the Government does not have to go to the lengths of using this fossilized Standing Order to avoid questions. In a third of the roughly 30 questions the Government has supposedly answered in this session, the Government essentially responded with: "We don't know" or "we do not care to find out" to a number of them.

For example, on April 3, my colleague, the Member for Yorkton—Melville (Mr. Nystrom), attempted to find out to what extent Canadian taxpayers subsidized corporate mergers by permitting tax deductions on interest arising from borrowing money. The Government's reply to this question was: "The requested data is not ascertainable from the financial statements and tax returns required to be filed with the Department and accordingly is not readily available to the Department". In other words, they said: "We cannot find the answer. We do not know what the answer will be". They then said that in order to obtain this information the Department would have to audit the books and records of each corporation claiming expenses against income. In other words, it is virtually impossible to find out without a major undertaking and a very large expenditure of funds.

• (1530)

On April 3 another colleague, the Hon. Member for Edmonton East (Mr. Harvey), asked through Question No. 12 how many Canadians received dividend tax credits for shares held in corporations which did not pay any income tax at all. This is a question of significant public importance, and I submit very much in the public interest.

The Government gave this \$1,000 tax credit to wealthy Canadians in recognition of the possibility of double taxation. The answer was the same as for Question No. 11. It did not know and it did not want to find out.

If you look at the answers given in the spring, Mr. Speaker, by the Government to Questions Nos. 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and a number more you will see that the Government is quite comfortable in refusing to answer our questions.