

*Oral Questions*

However, I, and I suspect other members of the House, do not make such charges lightly.

We rely on the evidence. We are serious about the evidence. However, we want the truth of the matter. That is why it is so profoundly important that this minister in some way have an opportunity to clarify the record. His integrity and that of the government is on the line. The whole question of conspiracy in the RCMP is on the line.

It is a shocking act of irresponsibility for the Prime Minister not to have indicated that he wants this minister to answer in the House today. I appeal to the Acting Prime Minister not to sit out this procedural debate in a cynical fashion leaving the impression that the government is going to sit behind the rules of the House and hide the truth. I appeal directly to the Acting Prime Minister through you, Mr. Speaker, that if they are not going to rely on the rules whereby the minister is not obligated to answer, to do something about insisting that the Minister of Supply and Services get to his feet, either later today or tomorrow, to make a statement on this important matter.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Fortin:** Mr. Speaker, I would like to refer to the same point of order. What happened during the question period will surely not be the best in our parliamentary records.

As a preliminary comment, the Prime Minister in reply to one of my questions asked me a question and accused me of upholding provincial rights. Mr. Speaker, I think that the Prime Minister, the champion of the constitutional *statu quo* and excessive centralization in Ottawa, did not accuse me but he paid me one of the nicest compliments which a Prime Minister can pay to a member of the opposition, that is of upholding provincial rights in this parliament since the provinces hold and must hold effective powers in this country.

Mr. Speaker, I put a question to the former solicitor general but you ruled that I could not direct it to him since he has changed his portfolio to become the Minister of Supply and Services. Mr. Speaker, there are precedents in this House where a minister has been called upon to answer questions about his activities in a former portfolio, thus enabling us to clarify a given situation. If the Minister of Supply and Services is so pure, so perfect, if he did not make any mistakes, if he is not involved in any conspiracy, why then does he refuse to take part in an inquiry and, second, why does he refuse to answer questions put to him in the House? I say that moving ministers from one portfolio to another enables the government to keep its secrets and hide the truth on such important matters. At the very moment we are making a point of order, Mr. Speaker, the minister is leaving the House. He does not care one bit about Parliament, he also refuses to answer questions put to him in the House by members of parliament, he is hiding behind the rules of the House.

Mr. Speaker, the ruling you will have to give is a very serious one. The minister involved is still a cabinet member. This minister is taking part in cabinet discussions, he is aware of what cabinet does to try and get out of this dilemma. Doubtless, the press release of the present Solicitor General

[Mr. Broadbent.]

was discussed, wholly or partly, in cabinet before being read here.

Mr. Speaker, the minister hides behind the Standing Orders of the House, knowing that light cannot be cast on the matter.

As you can realize, with all due respect, Mr. Speaker, we are unanimous on this side of the House in wanting to know the truth of the matter on behalf of the Canadian people and we beg of the Prime Minister the cabinet and that minister, if he is truly responsible, to reconsider this decision and to grant that inquiry, and specially, Mr. Speaker, we ask you, unanimously, that the minister rise in the House and answer our questions. Otherwise, Mr. Speaker, not only ministerial solidarity but the tradition whereby a minister, when he changes position, is no longer responsible, will prove to what extent the system is vicious, to what extent it protects the ministers regardless of the democratic rights of hon. members of this House.

Mr. Speaker, the House is being treated in cavalier fashion. It seems to me that if I were concerned, if points of order were brought up, if a whole question period dealt with such requests and the House were unanimous, I would at least have had the decency to stay in my seat and find out what hon. members of the opposition have to say. It shows a total lack of respect, Mr. Speaker, and I join the hon. members of the NDP and those of the Conservative party to prove to you how serious we think the matter is and ask the minister to act responsibly if he really is responsible.

• (1520)

[*English*]

**Mr. MacEachen:** Just a word or two on the point of order which has been raised, Mr. Speaker. I think it is clear that the ruling Your Honour made consistently, that a minister of the Crown cannot be questioned on his activities in a former portfolio when the minister currently responsible for the portfolio is here in the House to answer questions, is a sound one. I believe this is an old rule, an old practice. It may be a bad one, but I happen to believe it is a good rule.

Its application today has created some difficulty and some frustration for hon. members opposite but I do not think it is fair, because of that, to ask the Speaker to make an entirely new ruling and change the practice of the House; in other words, to press him, as he has been pressed very strongly today, to alter our practice by some *obiter dictum*.

**Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton):** Obiter?

**Mr. MacEachen:** It has been said that this is a political matter which should be dealt with by the Speaker. I believe such a course would be a mistake. The rules of the House should be observed and we should support the Speaker by consistently applying the rules.

**Mr. Gillies:** He ruled on this in March, 1975.

**Mr. MacEachen:** I listened to the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton as carefully as I could, but I believe the applica-