

I am sure the House will accept that these committees fulfil a useful function in providing information and communication with the public with respect to important policies and decisions, but while these are confined to one caucus it seems to me to be preferable that it is strictly the caucus research budget that would be employed to that end. Where public funds are used, I do not want to take the extra step and indicate that those public funds can be applied only to standing or special committees of the House. That may not necessarily be the case at all. It may be that public funds can in fact be used for ad hoc committees of the House, as was the application here. I am simply saying to the House, though not in a formal finding of privilege, that in my opinion the greater wisdom would be to ensure that in every case where this is done, where public funds are used to support such a committee even if it is an informal committee, such a committee consist of members of more than one party in the House. I think that is a wise practice to follow. Whether or not it conforms entirely to our practices and precedents or the departure from them that has been raised here is in confrontation with the privileges of members of the House, I do not need to decide at the present time.

I hope the House will take the sense of the argument, which I think is a very serious argument, and the sense of the Chair in this respect, that it is a practice which ought to be considered very carefully before it is entered into again. If it were to be attempted again, I would think the House ought to be consulted.

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BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Gray: Mr. Speaker, I should like to raise a point of order with respect to House business. On Friday, December 6, the government House leader said that Friday, December 14, would likely be the first day of the budget debate. I wonder if he would be in a position to confirm that it will be the first day and, if not, when the first day will be.

● (1510)

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I have no reason—at this point in any event—to change that date as the first day or to suggest a change in that date as the first day of the budget debate. I realize what the hon. member is referring to and his concern about that, and I undertake to him that if there is a change in that I will communicate it to him either directly or through his House leader. I realize that the hon. member does not want to be caught by surprise. It is not my intention to catch the House by surprise either.

Point of Order—Mr. Lapointe

INCOME TAX

MAILING OF PRINTED TAX FORMS

Hon. Walter Baker (President of the Privy Council and Minister of National Revenue): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Windsor West (Mr. Gray) put a question to me as to the date of the mailing of the forms. I can indicate a reply to that question. Part of it is contained in a speech I made in the House on November 28, 1979. The forms were put into envelopes about November 21. My speech was on November 28. The tax forms were sent to the Post Office prior to December 1 with an embargo put on their mailing until December 1, so the forms are in fact going as I had indicated in my speech would take place.

With respect to this I just want to repeat what I said in the course of that speech. Given the circumstances with respect to this, the mailing is two weeks later already this year than it has been in prior years.

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[Translation]

POINTS OF ORDER

MR. LAPOINTE—ABSENCE OF MINISTER FROM HOUSE

Mr. Charles Lapointe (Charlevoix): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order with respect to the question period today. As you know, we now have in cabinet a Minister of Transport (Mr. Mazankowski), a Minister of State (Transport) (Mr. Howie) in charge of water transport, and a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport (Mr. Jelinek), and they managed today to be absent all three of them at the same time. I would like to remind you that, in the past, having had the honour to serve as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport under the previous government, there was a rule in force at that time for the question period to the effect that when the Minister of Transport was absent, I, as parliamentary secretary, had to be present in the House. I would like to know whether it is still the opinion of the Prime Minister that parliamentary secretaries have no importance in the new government. Also, now that there are two ministers of transport rather than one, for the information not only of hon. members, Mr. Speaker, but of the people who want to get answers to the problems in some areas in Canada, I would like the Prime Minister to tell us whether he is going to instruct his cabinet colleagues that at least one representative of every department should be present during the question period.

[English]

Hon. Walter Baker (President of the Privy Council and Minister of National Revenue): Mr. Speaker, there could be an implication raised by the comments of my hon. friend as to the habits of attendance of the two ministers about whom he has directed his remarks. I think he knows—and he will accept from me the assertion—that the Minister of State (Transport) (Mr. Howie) and, indeed, the Minister of Transport (Mr.