

Privilege—Mr. Stackhouse

PETRO-CANADA

INQUIRY CONCERNING POSSIBLE PRIVATIZATION

Mr. Joe Reid (St. Catharines): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of State for Privatization. Will the Government be moving to privatize Petro-Canada as recommended by many, including the Economic Council of Canada, and if so, when?

Hon. Barbara McDougall (Minister of State (Privatization)): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Hon. Member for his question. There are a number of companies under active review, with no final decisions having been reached. I can assure him that we are examining Petro-Canada very closely.

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PRIVILEGE

ALLOCATION OF TIME DURING QUESTION PERIOD

Mr. Reginald Stackhouse (Scarborough West): Mr. Speaker, I rise on what is a question of privilege, if privilege is breached when a Member's freedom to speak in this Chamber is inhibited. Yesterday, as happens from time to time, there was a temporary turbulence in Question Period. The result was that only two Conservative Members were recognized in that period. That may not seem a serious matter, but there are about 135 Conservatives eligible to ask questions. Normally they compete for three questions.

Mr. Gauthier: Go behind the curtains.

Mr. Benjamin: Where are you all?

Mr. Speaker: The Chair has patiently heard matters of this nature raised by both sides of the House and from all Parties. I know that Hon. Members will want to hear the Member out.

Mr. Stackhouse: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When the number is reduced it means a loss of a third of our questions. In this Parliament about 45 per cent of the Members have had access to about 15 per cent of the questions.

With respect, I submit that there is no historic basis for the assumption that Question Period must be what at times it becomes, namely, the Opposition laying siege to the corridors of power and the Government trying to keep them out. While that is obviously part of what Parliament is about, Private Members who support Her Majesty's Government are not here just to be spectators.

After vigorous and cogent arguments by Liberal Members of the Twenty-Ninth Parliament, Mr. Speaker Lamoureux recognized the right of government Members to ask questions. I thank my Liberal predecessors and reaffirm their stand, for we too represent constituencies, we too speak for regions, we too advocate causes, we too share the rights that belong to all Members. When that share is reduced, the rights of the House

are reduced. I have raised this point not to lay blame but to seek redress.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I have a few comments to make about this point of order. It is not a question of privilege because the Oral Question Period is controlled by the Chair and it is up to the Speaker to decide who will be recognized to ask questions. I simply want to say that the Oral Question Period as we understand it lasts only 45 minutes and that it is our only opportunity to hold the Government accountable for its actions as executive.

It must answer the questions put to it by the Official Opposition and the third party in the House. We see this as one of our daily priorities on which we focus considerable attention. Occasionally, Government Members may, probably for political reasons, we might as well admit it, want to have some visibility during Question Period and ask questions. We agree with the Chair and this has always been our position, that on occasion the floor may be given to two or three Government Members. However, Mr. Speaker, they, being Members of the same party in this House, can see the Minister almost daily in the lobby and talk to him, which we cannot, and hear his position on the particular questions that concern them. So this is our opportunity as Members of the Opposition to put questions to the Government. The accountability of this Government depends on it, since it is not the members who support the Government who are going to make it more accountable. It is up to us, Mr. Speaker, and it is an age-old British tradition that the Official Opposition and the other opposition party ensure the Government is held responsible for its actions.

Mr. Marcel Prud'homme (Saint-Denis): On the same point of order, Mr. Speaker. I think the Chair might wish to take this matter under advisement, but I would first like to make a few comments. Our whip, the Hon. Member for Ottawa-Vanier (Mr. Gauthier), is correct in saying that, traditionally, Question Period has always been reserved for the Opposition. However, we must not see Parliament as consisting exclusively of Question Period. I realize that because of the interest shown by the media, everything seems to focus on Question Period. I believe that the Chair has been entirely correct in what it has done so far. With respect to the first fifteen minutes of Question Period, so far, Mr. Speaker, you and your predecessors have given more attention to Government Members. So if we divide up all the time spent in Parliament, we could conclude that the Government has more than its fair share of the proceedings. However, if we simply take part of the time set aside for debate in the House, I think the Hon. Member might have a case for what he has been saying today.

• (1210)

[*English*]

During the first 15 first minutes, Mr. Speaker, you distribute rather well in favour of the Government's side and we