

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, February 11, 1971

The House met at 2 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. BALDWIN—EFFECT OF CHANGE IN METHOD OF CALCULATING SEASONALLY ADJUSTED UNEMPLOYMENT

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege which affects every member of the House. It concerns the obligation of every member to do his duty as a member to his constituency, the nation and the House.

I conceive it is a member's duty to engage in meaningful and relevant debate on the business of the nation which comes before this House. To speak meaningfully, a member must be informed. When he speaks in criticism or praise of the administration of this nation's affairs by the government, it is essential that he be properly and correctly informed.

Parliament, therefore, has placed a duty upon the government to provide those members who request the same with accurate statistical information on a variety of aspects of the nation's business. To that end, Parliament established and staffed the Dominion Bureau of Statistics and placed the bureau under the administrative responsibility of the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce.

Section 32 of the Statistics Act reads in part as follows:

Subject to the direction of the minister, the bureau shall collect, compile, analyse, abstract and publish statistics in relation to all or any of the following matters:

(e) employment, unemployment.

Your Honour must be fully aware of how much time of the House has been devoted this session to debate on the question of unemployment. Your Honour must be fully aware of how important to that debate are the statistics used by members in comparing total unemployment figures, seasonally adjusted unemployment figures, unemployment insurance recipient figures, manpower job applicant figures, and in making monthly comparisons of these figures. If the Dominion Bureau of Statistics at any time changes its method of abstracting these statistics, it is the duty of the bureau not to act secretively but to announce this change and to give proper notice as far in advance of the change as possible, and it is the duty of the minister to announce it to members in the chamber and to explain and justify the reason for the change having been made.

The importance Parliament attaches to meaningful information, including consistency in the methodology of abstracting statistics, is made signally clear in section 35 of the Statistics Act. That section makes it an offence for any person to wilfully provide the bureau with false information or practise any other deception.

The Dominion Bureau of Statistics and the Department of Manpower and Immigration have made a joint public report on the labour force which was released today, and it would appear that they have changed their statistical methodology in calculating the seasonal adjustment of labour force figures. By that one change, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics and the Department of Manpower and Immigration have deprived Members of Parliament of meaningful comparison between the seasonally adjusted unemployment figures for most of 1970 and those of 1971. This change can only confuse the debate on unemployment that has continued throughout 1970 to the present time, is being debated today by the House, and will continue. I could go through this release and establish beyond any shadow of doubt that the information contained in it can only serve to confuse and make it difficult for members to participate in this debate.

• (2:10 p.m.)

Any doubts I may have had about bringing up this question of privilege have been overborne by the fact that this is the fourth time within a few weeks that the government, through issuing secret memoranda, has engaged in what I can only call a program of deceit which is repugnant to this House and repugnant to the country. It is in that larger sense that I ask Your Honour to hold that I have in fact established a *prima facie* case and can move the motion which I have prepared if Your Honour so holds.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for Peace River has given the Chair the notice required under the Standing Orders of his intention to raise this matter by way of question of privilege. As he and all other hon. members know, the duty of the Chair is to give an opinion by way of ruling on whether there is a *prima facie* case of privilege. If the ruling of the Chair were that there is a *prima facie* case, then a motion could be put by the hon. member and debated by the House.

I have given the matter very serious thought and I have to inform the hon. member that I really do not think there is a *prima facie* case of privilege. What he complains of is that the statistics, which I understand have been published today, do not follow the methodology, to use the hon. member's word, followed in previous months or previous years, which makes it difficult for the House to continue its debate on unemployment. I would think that this is essentially a grievance. The hon. member may have a very legitimate complaint with respect to a question of administration, but this does not amount to a breach of parliamentary privilege. Again, with great respect I suggest to the hon. member and to the House that while there may be a grievance on the