

● (1632)

Getting back to the question, the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark) does not speak to me, and I do not speak to him, according to the papers, but this question of privilege is a good one. I have been on my feet for at least three or four weeks straight trying to ask questions in this House. During that time I have been in to see Mr. Speaker. He has promised me that the next day I will be permitted to ask a question. However, I do understand his problem, and he has a devilish problem. He has members of the opposition parties, and I am not a member of an opposition party—God forbid—asking lengthy questions which could be shortened down into very brief questions. If questions are to be asked during the question period they should be brief, and supplementary questions should be shortened.

I would suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, that if the preambles are too long you should cut them off, snuff them out, and if the answers are verbose, toss the answers out. I think we could reduce these questions and answers so that we could all get a break and a crack at asking questions and receiving answers. If members were given this break, and Cabinet ministers did their homework and knew the answers, we would be better off. If ministers do not know the answers they should say they do not know.

I know kids who have gone through school and graduated with Ph.D's who still at times have to say they do not know the answers but will get them for me. The ministers should be truthful and tell us they do not know. That is all I have to say, Mr. Speaker, but I would like to ask a question tomorrow!

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Speaker: In fairness I must note there are several other members who want to participate in this discussion. This is a matter of great importance raised by the hon. member for Frontenac-Lennox and Addington (Mr. Alkenbrack), the hon. member for Victoria-Haliburton (Mr. Scott), and others who have contributed.

I think we all understand the very difficult constraints we operate under during the question period. There have been times when I have had to admonish members on both sides of the House about making questions and answers brief. We have a show of splendid co-operation then for a short period of time, which soon tends to dissipate. It is difficult for the Chair to see members of the House trying day after day to be recognized, and know that their legitimate questions are being deferred because of pressing matters of national concern that do take up a good deal of time.

On the other hand, it is not very appropriate for the Chair to be intervening constantly to keep members on both sides of the House under check. We have to try to strike a balance.

It is ironic, I think, that today, if my memory serves me correctly, and I tend to remember these things with great relish, the question period began on an exemplary note. It seems to me the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark), in leading off today, asked questions on matters of the economy.

Public Service

He and the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chrétien) had a series of four questions and answers in the space of less than five minutes. If we could do that every day it would be a wonderful thing. However, thereafter it seems that things began to run downhill. Many questions and many answers were lengthy. Both sides were equally at fault.

Perhaps I should, after these representations, try to intervene more often. I do not like to intervene too often. On the other hand, I do see the problem building up. It will be interesting to note tomorrow how much assistance and co-operation we can get. Perhaps it will be enough to last us all the way through until Easter.

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PUBLIC SERVICE STAFF RELATIONS ACT

MEASURE TO AMEND

Hon. Robert K. Andras (President of the Treasury Board) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-28, to amend the Public Service Staff Relations Act.

Motion agreed to, bill read the first time and ordered to be printed.

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Mrs. Holt: Mr. Speaker, with the greatest respect for your position and for you yourself, and I want to preface my remarks by saying I have the greatest admiration for you any your sense of justice, I do feel that backbenchers on this side did not have a chance even to comment on a debate about the ability of backbenchers to ask questions. I rose in the hope that I could make just a short comment, but I was not recognized. I would appreciate being given the right to speak for the backbenchers on this side of the House.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Simcoe North (Mr. Rynard) was standing, as was the hon. member for Villeneuve (Mr. Caouette) and two or three other hon. members in this corner, including the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre (Mr. McKenzie). I think we all recognize that the matter was not essentially a question of privilege but a very serious grievance. Therefore, I attempted to get a general participation. There was, I thought, a rather able representation from the government side of the House by the hon. Minister of National Revenue (Mr. Guay). I might have carried on and heard all other members, but I thought I had heard sufficient on the matter.

I regret that all hon. members were not given a chance to participate. If I wanted to take a very hard line perhaps I should have closed it off right at the beginning because the matter was not essentially a question of privilege, but rather a serious grievance. I have been well advised of it and I hope we can improve the situation as quickly as possible. I regret that all hon. members who wanted to contribute could not do so.