

Order Paper Questions

However, that has always been part of our practice, and that was basically what was being done a moment ago by the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Hnatyshyn).

The House will realize, I am sure, that since there is no obligation on the ministry to make answers under our Standing Orders, it would not be possible for the Chair to find that the failure to give answers either to one set of questions or to one member would in any way constitute a breach of privilege. As to determining whether or not the failure to answer questions is a deliberate decision not to reply, I would have grave difficulty, even if I knew it was a deliberate decision not to reply, to constitute that as a question of privilege; because since there is no obligation to reply, it can hardly be called a breach of privilege or a breach of the rules in any way to fail to reply. Whether that be deliberate, or whether it be negligent, whether intentional or unintentional, since the rules do not require a reply, I cannot find the basis for a question of privilege in failure to reply. Therefore, with regret, I set aside the matter of privilege.

It still remains, as was done a moment ago as part of our regular practice, that each day when the question is put as to whether or not the remaining questions should be allowed to stand, members contribute any grievances they have respecting questions which are outstanding. So long as that intervention is in good faith and makes reference to questions which have, indeed, been outstanding for some time, the Chair has never interrupted.

Mr. Goodale: Mr. Speaker, I do not wish to prolong the point, because you have already disposed of it as a question of privilege. However, I was going to make the point Your Honour has just made in dealing with it procedurally. But to deal with the substance of the issue which was raised, quite apart from the procedural question, may I say that the government does, of course, take very seriously all questions which appear on the order paper.

An hon. Member: Oh, oh!

Mr. Goodale: I have noted the representations which have been made today in a serious fashion, although some of the gratuitous explanations surrounding them might not be all that well taken. I do take the points that hon. members have made as a clear indication of their desire in good faith to secure information. A few days ago, on a similar point of order, I replied at some length about the answering of questions which appear on the order paper. I do not intend to repeat all that argument today. It served, I think, to illustrate the magnitude of the task which has to be done in answering 2,823 questions which appear on the order paper as of today's date. I can only add at this point—this may be of some reassurance to members—that it is still my intention to proceed to answer all questions which appear on the order paper before the end of this session.

I will take particular note of the specific questions referred to today and see if there are ways to expedite those items in particular since they are of interest and concern to members. I

trust they will believe in the good faith which exists on this side, just as I believe in theirs.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, may I, on behalf of my colleague from Winnipeg North, draw attention to six questions, four of which were filed on October 12, 1976, and two of which were filed on October 13, 1976? I am sure the parliamentary secretary realizes that to be told that hundreds of questions have been answered is no answer to its taking more than eight months to answer these questions. I have looked at them and I can understand it taking a month or so, but not eight months.

Mr. Speaker: Shall the remaining questions be allowed to stand?

Mr. Coates: Mr. Speaker, there is just one point I would like to make. What concerns me, sir, is some of the remarks you have made which I think are proper. I do not argue that under the rules we have now, there is no obligation on the part of the government to answer questions, except for the fact that we have two forms of questions. We have those questions that are put in the question period in an oral way. Then we have written questions which the table is very careful to make certain are factual questions, seeking only information. There is a very significant gap between—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. If the hon. member has a complaint about a specific question, I am quite prepared to have him make it. I was not aware he had risen to make a contribution to the question of privilege.

Mr. Coates: I have some specific complaints to make, but I want to get down to the fact that every question here—and I have quite a number which are eight or nine months old—is the result of members working quite a long time to prepare and seek information of a factual nature. I do not think the excuse is good enough that there are 2,800 questions left on the order paper which are unanswered. If there were 2,800 questions on the order paper, put there last week and not answered, I would say that was all right. But some questions I have on the order paper are nine or ten months old. As the hon. member for Leeds (Mr. Cossitt) said, it is quite obvious that he is being discriminated against. There can be no other conclusion reached, because almost all the questions first put on the order paper were his questions. The government has determined that his questions are not to be answered. That is a breach of his personal privileges as a member of this House—

An hon. Member: That is not true.

● (1620)

Mr. Coates: There are no two ways about it. The fact of the matter is that questions which have been on the order paper for ten months or more have not been answered. The hon. member cannot be singled out, no matter whether it is information which is damaging to the government or otherwise. He is asking for factual information, and that is his right.