

Alleged Tax Reform Propaganda

prepared to admit that there are some good proposals in the white paper. But the issue here is much deeper. Are we moving toward an age in which the government will use its financial resources, its machinery, to condition the people at their own expense to accept government proposals?

Lest Your Honour feel that this is in the nature of only a grievance or a complaint—you will pardon me if I think you might get that idea because it seems to me that quite often that is your response to a question of privilege—may I submit it is more than that. Yes, it is a grievance that the government is using money in this way. Yes, it is a complaint that taxpayers' money is being spent to argue one side of the question. But in this instance the government has gone farther. It has asked the members of our caucus, and I believe the other opposition caucuses have had the same request, to join it in this wrongdoing. The government has asked us to be accessories to this malpractice.

● (2:10 p.m.)

The government has asked us to give our blessing to what they are doing by taking their slides and going around the country showing them. In that respect, Mr. Speaker, I submit that this is an affront to parliament and constitutes a breach of parliamentary privilege. I believe, therefore, that this whole matter should be looked into.

As is so often said, this may only be the tip of the iceberg. This is what we know is being done—these coloured slides. How much else is being done? How many advertising agencies have been engaged? How much of the taxpayers' money is being spent propagandizing a government proposition that has not yet been approved by Parliament? I think this matter should be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. The committee should look into the whole question of the rightness or wrongness of this whole practice. It should determine why this was entered into before there was any consultation with Parliament. Information should be obtained as to how much money is being spent on this whole proposition.

I offer this to Your Honour very seriously as a question of parliamentary privilege. My hon. friend, the President of the Privy Council, laughs. We got along very well last Friday when he was not here. I hope he will not be here this Friday so we can get a lot of business done.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): My friends opposite are not aware of how close they are moving us to 1984 by these ideas, by using the people's money to condition them to accept the ideas the government wants them to accept. I submit, Mr. Speaker, that applies whether the idea is good, bad or in between.

As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, if it is Your Honour's inclination to see in the first instance that this is obviously a grievance or complaint, I ask Your Honour to think it through a little further and realize that we, as Members of Parliament, were not consulted about this and yet are being asked if we would like to have these slides to show around the country. We have no intention of doing so, but we are being asked to be accessories to this malpractice. I did not say crime. I am content to call it a malpractice. But we are being asked to give our blessing to something that ought not to be done. Of course in recent days there have been some complaints about fact sheets being distributed over there. This may be an attempt to offset that.

If this was paid for by the Liberal party we could not object. If it was paid for out of public funds, we strongly object. We also object to the insult to Members of Parliament in our being asked to join in this malpractice. Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, if Your Honour will be good enough to find I have a prima facie case of privilege I should then be prepared to move:

That the action of the Minister of Finance in asking members of parliament to make use of propaganda material produced by the government at public expense, without any consultation prior to the production of the said material, be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, and that the said committee be empowered to inquire into the total amount of money being spent on the government's propaganda campaign in support of its proposals for income tax reform.

Hon. E. J. Benson (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, the argument put forward by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre is an argument that the people of Canada should not have the right to consider tax reform before it is legislated into law.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Benson: When he talks about preparing slides, perhaps he should be talking about the printing of the white paper and suggesting that we should have the kind of government in the future which does not involve participatory democracy, which does not inform the people of what its intentions are—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.