

Oral Questions

CONDUCT OF INQUIRY

Hon. Bob Kaplan (York Centre): Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Acting Prime Minister. He tells us that new ground is being broken in the use of this impartial inquiry. The Prime Minister is picking the commissioner. The Prime Minister is setting the terms of reference. Yet the Prime Minister is also telegraphing the fact that his Minister will be vindicated and brought back into the Cabinet. How can you possibly break new ground and have an impartial inquiry with that kind of prejudgment by the Prime Minister?

● (1420)

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Acting Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, the hon. gentleman should know, he has been here long enough, and certainly his Leader knows, that we are dealing with a unique and exclusive responsibility of the Prime Minister concerning conflict of interest. He should also know or have concluded, if he has not by now, that whatever the report of that inquiry, it will be made public. There is that safeguard as well.

PRIME MINISTER'S OPINION

Hon. Bob Kaplan (York Centre): Will the Prime Minister make public the reason, the facts he has, which justify saying, as he did in Korea, that the Minister will be vindicated and brought back into cabinet? What was he talking about?

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Acting Prime Minister): There is no analogy there at all. The former Minister has said and continues to say the same thing. It is only Members opposite who are foreclosing any option other than guilt. Their minds are closed to any other possibility. That in itself demonstrates the compelling need for impartiality.

PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT

Hon. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa): Mr. Speaker, surely what we are talking about here are impartiality and fairness. When I asked him yesterday quite deliberately whether he and the Prime Minister maintained their view that the former Minister was innocent of conflict of interest, the Deputy Prime Minister said both he and the Prime Minister "would not prejudice the outcome of the inquiry". Is that answer consistent with the view expressed by the Prime Minister last night in Seoul, Korea, when speaking to the media, that he was convinced at the outset, before the evidence is even considered, that the Minister would be totally vindicated? Are you loading the dice in advance in this inquiry?

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Acting Prime Minister): I said no such thing. What I was trying to convey to the Leader of the NDP, in response to questions by his supporters and those of the right hon. gentleman opposite, was that they should have the decency to allow a process of impartial investigation to proceed without loading the dice, which they obviously want to do.

PRIME MINISTER'S FORECAST

Hon. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa): Mr. Speaker, we on this side are quite happy to have what the Deputy Prime Minister supported when he was on this side, namely, a consideration by the Standing Committee on Elections, Privileges and Procedure. It is not we who are loading the dice.

Does he not think that a Prime Minister who is trying to get an impartial, fair-minded person to look at this is really loading the dice and establishing a prejudicial position? Is he not doing that when he says at the outset that the Minister is going to be vindicated? That is loading the dice.

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Acting Prime Minister): Not at all. Implicit in the question is the assumption that nowhere in this country can there be found a person of sufficient national reputation and integrity to conduct an impartial investigation as to the facts. I do not accept that whatsoever.

Mr. Broadbent: It would be nice just for once if the Minister would answer a question he is asked.

[*Translation*]

INQUIRY WHY MINISTER DOES NOT ADOPT APPROACH HE
ADVOCATED THREE YEARS AGO

Hon. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa): Mr. Speaker, my last question to the Minister is as follows: When he was on this side of the House as Leader of the Opposition three years ago, he moved a motion to have the Committee on Privileges and Elections examine the question of Ministers and conflicts of interest. That was three years ago.

Why didn't the Minister take the same approach in this case?

● (1425)

[*English*]

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Acting Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I believe we are doing precisely that. If the Hon. Leader of the New Democratic Party would revisit the processes that were outlined in the September 9 tabling of the Code of Conduct, it anticipated circumstances which might call for the appointment of an impartial person to investigate the facts. It did not preclude the publication of the report, once made. I have already indicated—

Mr. Broadbent: For Privileges and Elections?

Mr. Nielsen: It did not preclude the option of a reference to a standing committee of the House—it might be that one—when the report is made. But surely, to anticipate beyond that is going a little too far with respect to the integrity of the process itself.