

of Justice had just said nothing final had been decided as yet, and that should be sufficient to set aside all their complaints and grievances concerning the intentions of the Minister of Justice or the meaning of the words he spoke in answer to the question put to him in this particular context.

Therefore, Madam Speaker, considering the facts and on the face of the answer provided by the Minister of Justice, it would seem that the minister has not said anything that conflicts with reality. And if his words were ambiguous or incomplete or confusing, if there was any lack of precision, he has today, as a minister and a member of this House, given his word that he did not intend to mislead the House, and he has given explanations for his answer. It seems to me that on the basis of parliamentary practice, this is sufficient to settle the matter once and for all. His words must be accepted, and his answer interpreted in the light of the additional explanations given today, which I feel were not even necessary, but which he thought it was his duty to give. In the circumstances, I must say once more that I find it unconscionable and offensive that opposition members with the status of those who have risen in the House up to now, should wish to continue to doubt the word and undermine the credibility of the Minister of Justice of Canada and to misuse our parliamentary institutions, in that they refuse to take into account a simple aspect of parliamentary practice according to which, when a member gives his word in the House, it is to be accepted as such and casting doubts as to the reputation and the intentions of the hon. member in question must cease.

Therefore, for all these reasons, Madam Speaker, including the references produced so eloquently by my parliamentary secretary and which are extremely apt and deal with the matter, and also the facts themselves and the explanations provided by the Minister of Justice (Mr. Chrétien) with respect to his reply, and considering the redundant comments of the member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) following the reply given by the Minister of Justice, and finally, considering the Minister of Justice for Canada gave his word, I suggest, with due respect, that the matter should be settled immediately, and that there is absolutely no prima facie case for a question of privilege and that we should proceed with consideration of the motion proposed by the New Democratic Party.

● (1650)

[English]

Mr. Hnatyshyn: Madam Speaker, I want to be brief and deal precisely with the issue before us. What I think both the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) and his parliamentary secretary have asked you to do is unacceptable in this House. They have asked you to make a ruling as to whether or not you believe the minister has been telling the truth. I do not think that is your role and function, Madam Speaker. I do not think the minister can stand up now in answer to a question of privilege raised by my colleague, the hon. member for St.

John's West, and give reasons and excuses why he said what he said.

If he really intended to persuade us in this House that the statement was actual fact, he would have taken the first opportunity and instructed the House at three o'clock today that he would be making a statement of clarification. He chose not to do that. He chose not to take the initiative in this matter, and only in response to the case put forward by my colleague from St. John's West did he then try to explain exactly what he did mean by his answer.

Mr. Pinard: He had no choice.

Mr. Hnatyshyn: The question here is not whether you or I or the member for St. John's West was questioning the word and the truth of what the Minister of Justice (Mr. Chrétien) said. It is not any of us who do that. Rather it is the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) who has put into question the veracity of what the Minister of Justice said on Tuesday last. It is nothing that the member for St. John's West has said. The Prime Minister said that a decision was taken with respect to the whole issue in cabinet prior to the minister coming into the House. For a minister now to stand up and insert a word such as "final", or for the Prime Minister to try to explain it by using a word such as "conditional", has absolutely no relevance to the question here at all.

The Prime Minister by his words has indicated that what the Minister of Justice said was untrue. That is basically what you have to consider, Madam Speaker, in determining whether or not there is a prima facie case. It is not for you to consider whether or not the Minister of Justice said that he did not mean that or that he did not mean to deliberately mislead the House.

You have to determine in your responsibility whether or not the statement made by the Minister of Justice on a very important issue, a very complex issue, the matter of the control of the offshore resources, of which you can take judicial notice, was in fact a correct statement made by the Minister of Justice, of whether there is a reasonable basis to conclude that was a false answer, that there was knowledge on the part of the minister that a decision had been made by cabinet.

I ask you, Madam Speaker, to consider the length of the reference to the Supreme Court of Canada. The reference contains three pages and a map of the Hibernia area. This is a complicated and detailed reference to the Supreme Court of Canada with supporting documentation, which is not a matter on which a decision is made overnight or conditionally.

The minister will have the opportunity, if we have the matter referred to the committee, to explain precisely what did transpire, what actions took place and at what time meetings took place. He will have the opportunity to explain himself. But that is not our role in the House today. Our role is purely and simply to determine whether or not the Prime Minister was right in saying that the Minister of Justice was not telling the truth when he said in answering a question in the House that no decision had been made.