

Statutory Instruments

Not long ago I attended a meeting in Sudbury where the Canadian Transport Commission was holding a hearing, only to find that the day before the hearing took place a report was issued by a senior member of the Department of Transport in Ottawa under the direction of the Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang). That report said that Nordair, which was making an application to land at Sudbury, would not be allowed to land at the airport because the runways would not carry 737's. It was already carrying DC-9's, and DC-9's only weigh about 1,000 pounds less than a 737's, so that they are almost the same size.

● (2020)

It is interesting to note that the district office where the reports and measurements are made, and from where all the information comes, made a report not long before that saying that, if necessary, the largest planes flying in Canada at that time, 747's, could be handled. It was interesting because the manager of the airport, who was not an employee of the Department of Transport but an employee of the city of Sudbury, telephoned the district director in Toronto and asked him what was the state of the runways. He was given a report that they were better than they had been, in excellent condition, able to handle any loadings in the foreseeable future, there was no difficulty for landings, and the underbase was sufficient to carry anything which would be landing.

The airport manager went back and told the hearing about this. Where does that leave the commissioner, who is a former member of this House? He was sitting there with a report saying that no matter what was done with relation to that application, the airport was not going to be certified to handle that type of plane, and whether there was a hearing or not, there was not going to be a licence granted to land at that airport.

I am sure that report was confidential. I am sure if it existed at all it was highly confidential, and for no one else's eyes except a senior official and the minister. This is one of the very great abuses taking place in a particular field.

There have been advances made in the Statutory Instruments Committee. I think it made some excellent recommendations. The people who attend that committee are to be congratulated for the work they have done. They are not out to destroy our form of government, this government, or the operation of our civil service, but they are out to see that the Canadian public is given all the information possible, and I think they should be supported and given a new mandate to continue their discussion.

In all sincerity I ask the government to give very serious consideration before using the lame excuse, every time, that information would be detrimental to Canada if it were released. If each minister looking at information provided by his officials would consider whether he agreed that it should be confidential, he might be able to release much of this information and make members of parliament, members of the press gallery, and the citizens of Canada much better informed. That would considerably strengthen the parliamentary process and democracy in Canada.

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (President of the Privy Council): Madam Speaker, this is the first time since the provisional

[Mr. Peters.]

revision of the Standing Orders regarding the business of supply that advantage has been taken of the device permitting hon. members in the opposition to make use of allotted days to propose motions which must come to a vote but which, if accepted by the House, do not constitute, by definition, a vote of no confidence in the government.

When the rules were altered in 1968 it was provided that opposition motions which were required to come to a vote were, by definition, no confidence motions. Before that time opposition motions on supply had often been affirmative in their wording and at least three times in the previous 20 years such motions have been adopted. At least in part because of the present provisional Standing Orders I am happy to inform hon. members that the government finds the motion today wholly acceptable and commends it to the House.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Sharp: For the first time since 1963 a government has been able to accept an opposition member's motion on supply, and not a little credit must go to my friend, the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin). He has been a firm advocate of a less restricted approach to government information, and yet by avoiding a strident or partisan approach he has been able to bring the matter closer and closer to a positive resolution.

Perhaps I may be permitted a slight digression by observing that the hon. member has applied this honest, constructive, but hardly uncritical or unduly compliant, approach to his role as opposition House leader as well, and I am sure that our fellow House leaders, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), and the hon. member for Richmond (Mr. Beaudoin), would agree that this approach has proved invaluable, not only in the daily management of the business of the House but also in making progress toward procedural reform.

I do hope the hon. member will stay long enough so that we can continue to make even greater progress in procedural reform, and I know he links the subject of our discussion tonight with that other matter, and I have some sympathy with him in this respect. I think the two matters do have a relationship.

The Standing Joint Committee on Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments has been seized of the question now before us, or matters bearing on it, for almost three years. It has been in the last 13 or 14 months that the greatest progress has been made. It is interesting that nobody's approach, either on the side of the opposition parties or on the government side, has become static. This reflects the constructive manner in which the joint chairmen have conducted the proceedings.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Sharp: I should like to pay tribute to the chairman from the House side, under whom I have given testimony, and who certainly has conducted the proceedings in a very non-partisan and constructive way. If I may also mention the major contribution which has been made by such other interested participants as the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River (Mr. Reid), he has taken a very special interest in this subject.