

● (1520)

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, I am rising mainly because of a remark made by the Postmaster General (Mr. Blais). He said that the minister is a minister of the Crown, and he can table anything he wants. I remind you, sir, and the Postmaster General, that there is at least one precedent that I recall when Mr. Speaker Lamoureux denied the Hon. E. J. Benson the right to table a document which, when looked at, turned out to be just a press release. I submit that this document is much the same. It starts off by saying "I am today announcing such and such". Some of the things he says he is announcing are in this four-page statement which he has asked to table, and some of them are not there. As I recall the ruling of Mr. Speaker Lamoureux, it was along the lines just mentioned by two or three speakers, namely, that this is an abuse of the right to table official documents under Standing Order 41(2).

We set up the Standing Order regarding the making of statements so that when statements were to be made, they could be responded to and ministers could be questioned. It is a line which is hard to draw, but I say to the Postmaster General that it is not true to say that because a minister is a minister of the Crown, he can table anything he wants. I think Your Honour ought to have a look at this document and compare it with the one Mr. Speaker Lamoureux refused to let Mr. Benson table.

Mr. O'Connell: Mr. Speaker, my understanding of what the minister is seeking to table is that it is an agreement between the federal and provincial governments written out in letters which are among the tabled documents, that is to say, documents with a statement explaining those documents. If that is the case, it seems to me that the tabling falls within even the narrow construction being put upon it by hon. members opposite and ought not to raise objections even on that score. However, I think the point made by the Postmaster General (Mr. Blais) is the valid one.

Mr. Speaker: Obviously we are hampered to a certain extent by guessing at this stage as to what the document really is. Certainly, the Chair is. I have a copy of the document here and I am perfectly able to read it, but I do not think it would be expected that for the purposes of this rule or this argument the Chair or anyone else would be able to absorb, digest and accurately describe the nature of the document and apply it against the precedents.

On the face of it I must say that the point is well taken. The document certainly seems to be in the nature of a statement by the minister and in fact seems to be more in the nature of perhaps a release, a statement or a speech. I would be terribly concerned, if the document were received pursuant to this Standing Order, about whether a minister could table speech notes. Obviously, this matter falls within the minister's administrative competence and falls very directly within his responsibilities, but I think it might be very dangerous to get into this without knowing exactly where we are going.

Divorce Act

On the other hand, it may be important at this moment that the documents be tabled, and I would like to reserve my decision as to whether there is any restriction on the right of a minister to table documents under Standing Order 41(2) with respect to that document which is headed "Statement on Oil and Natural Gas Prices by the Hon. Alastair Gillespie". While I reserve on that, it seems to me that there are other documents which do not fall under—in anyone's opinion—a restriction. I do not know whether the minister would prefer, while I reserve on this, to withhold all documents or to table those which are not objected to and simply withhold the statement.

Mr. Gillespie: I suggest that it is very important that I table the two supporting letters which I placed before the House. One is a letter addressed to Mr. Getty, and the second is from Mr. Getty to me setting forth the essentials of a federal-provincial agreement with respect to oil prices.

I would like to make a further point, a point which was made by my colleague. The additional statement which I placed before the House entitled "Statement on Oil and Natural Gas Prices"—

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): You could have read it.

Mr. Gillespie: —was offered as an elaboration or as a clarification of the content of and the background to the negotiations themselves which took place over a period of time. They culminated in early May with a federal-provincial minister's conference and subsequent discussions between myself and provincial premiers and provincial ministers. I have tried to put these two letters which set forth a very important federal-provincial agreement in context.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): A statement on motions should do that.

Mr. Speaker: Be that as it may, I am sure that the document was proposed by the minister with the best of intentions. I do have to take seriously the point as to whether it is the kind of document envisaged by the rules and whether there is a restriction. Therefore, perhaps the minister could be deemed to have tabled, pursuant to Standing Order 41(2) the exchange of correspondence referred to, but for the moment withhold the statement until the Chair has had an opportunity to consider the arguments and review the precedents.

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DIVORCE ACT

On the Order—Introduction of Bills.

June 17, 1977—Mr. Robinson—Bill intituled: "An act to amend the Divorce Act (living separate and apart)"

Some hon. Members: Explain.

Mr. W. Kenneth Robinson (Toronto-Lakeshore): Mr. Speaker, the purpose of this bill is to reduce to 18 months the three to five year waiting period required for a marriage that