

*Speaker's Ruling*

The Chair is extremely concerned that allowing the Government's request to transform a question into a Notice of Motion would appear as a step backwards in the evolution of the procedure governing written questions and would go against the expectation of the McGrath reform to have a more efficient method of dealing with questions.

*[Translation]*

As indicated by several Hon. Members, there is a long-standing practice which allows the Government to ask the House, in those instances when there is to be a lengthy reply, that the question be made an Order for Return. Such a Return is then either tabled forthwith, if the reply is ready, or tabled at a later date on completion of the reply.

*[English]*

There is also a procedurally quite acceptable practice—and indeed many Hon. Members have suggested that it is quite legitimate for the Government to do so—simply to respond by saying that the question cannot be answered because of the time and the human or financial resources involved. May I refer Hon. Members to Questions No. 8, 11, 12, 13 and 14 already answered in such a way by the Government during the current session.

## • (1520)

The Government may continue the practice of simply declining, with an explanation, to answer questions which it finds are too burdensome. An explanation could also be given, during Routine Proceedings, that certain questions could not be answered within the requested time and perhaps reasons for that could be given. It should be understood that there is no obligation on the Government to provide a perfect answer, only a fair one. A Member in framing his or her question would accept part of the responsibility for the quality of the answer.

*[Translation]*

It is possible that the problems we now face arise partly as a result of recent reforms. The McGrath

Committee foresaw some of the difficulties and commented, on page 46 of its report: "To avoid the possibility that members would try to get around the four-question rule by asking questions containing numerous sub-questions, all written questions should be directed to the Clerk for close and careful scrutiny as to form and content."

*[English]*

In that regard, the Clerk of the House must apply more rigorously the provisions of Standing Order 39(2) and, as stated in recommendation 7.10 of the report from the McGrath Committee:

—reject outright or to split into separate and distinct questions those questions that contain unrelated sub-questions.

No doubt there are many other solutions which could also be explored. It appears to the Chair that the subject is worthy of consideration at some greater length than we have been able to devote to it here. In fact, the Chair would welcome the guidance of the Standing Committee on Elections, Privileges, Procedures and Private Members' Business in this matter. The committee can do that within its mandate, or if the House is so inclined, a specific Order of Reference could be given to the committee, as the Hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands (Mr. Milliken) has suggested. In any case, as Speaker, I strongly suggest to the Members of that committee that their recommendations on this question would be extremely useful to the Chair. Perhaps we may hope for some guidance from the committee on this issue.

In the meantime, however, I must regretfully state that the Chair cannot agree to the request of the Hon. Parliamentary Secretary.

I want to say in addition that the Chair is extremely cognizant of the fact that this is not a one-sided issue. If Hon. Members will read carefully the decision which I have just rendered, I think it will be made clear that I am concerned as Speaker that both sides of the House are treated fairly in what is clearly becoming a problem. I would hope that the House, as I have suggested, would move to find a solution. I thank Hon. Members.