

procurable in the House of Commons. As somewhat of a student of constitutional development, let me say I have not heard such an outrageous statement made by a minister since the days of the Right Hon. C. D. Howe in 1956.

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, as you may have noted, I rose at the same moment as did the hon. member for Northumberland-Durham (Mr. Lawrence) to say something about this very point. It was my thought, when I was getting to my feet, that I would simply draw attention to what had been said and reserve the right to raise the matter as a question of privilege some day next week when the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) is here. That is still my view.

I fully recognize that Your Honour is not in a position to require anyone to answer a question or to make a speech; you can stop us from doing things but you cannot require us to do things. However, it seems to me that the issue raised today is one which calls for a clear statement by the Prime Minister regarding the responsibilities of the new Solicitor General (Mr. Blais), indeed, as to the responsibilities of all ministers.

The Solicitor General did say today he is responsible only as from February 1, 1978. You Honour has frequently told us that we cannot ask former ministers of any department about what went on when they were in charge, and the corollary is that the present minister of any department is responsible for answering questions concerning that department. I dare hope the minister will agree that he slipped a little on that—

An hon. Member: Wait and see!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I am prepared to wait and see, but it came to my ears that his responsibility began only on February 1, 1978. But as I say, I am prepared to let that wait until we have had a chance to read the record.

On the point of whether the Solicitor General is going to answer questions I acknowledge, of course, that any minister has the right any day to refuse to answer a question. But for a minister to stand up and say he does not intend to answer any questions addressed to him in a certain area, no matter what they are, relating to the two commissions which are now sitting—

An hon. Member: He did not say that!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): He said it, and he admits he said it. There is no question about it. I recognize the minister's right to deal with each question on its merits, but for a minister to tell members of parliament that no matter what questions we ask, if they relate to the McDonald or to the Keable inquiry, he will not answer them, is surely an affront to parliament.

Your Honour has suggested we should wait until some specific case arises. I submit there was a specific case today. My hon. friend from New Westminster (Mr. Leggatt) asked a question about certain evidence before the McDonald inquiry which, in our view, contradicts what has been said on the floor of this House. Surely we are not to be refused answers in a

case like that. In my submission the minister's whole position must be reviewed.

As I say, I recognize that Your Honour cannot require ministers to answer questions but I think the Prime Minister owes it to the House to ensure that the principle of ministerial responsibility is maintained and that the appointment of Royal Commissions will not be used as an excuse for withholding information from this Chamber. I reserve the right to raise the matter as a question of privilege on the Prime Minister's return after we have read the record of today's discussion.

Mr. Lawrence: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have no machinery whereby I can hear the person who initiated this discussion a second time. I simply say I have no motion before me dealing with a specific question of privilege in relation to events which have taken place today. I do not want to restrict the argument. I understand that this is a matter of great concern. It has been addressed by several members. If there is a desire to deal with the question today and get a decision I must have something specific before me, and I do not.

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Deputy Prime Minister and President of Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, I find that to some extent the argument has been exaggerated. Every one of us would agree that the Solicitor General (Mr. Blais) became responsible for the administration of the department the moment he was sworn in. Otherwise it could be argued that he was responsible prior to that date. I do not think anyone would disagree with me on that point. It is entirely in this context I understood the Solicitor General to use the date February 1. I did not hear him say he felt no responsibility to answer questions relating to the activities of the department prior to February 1. In fact, I heard him say the very opposite, and I believe the record will demonstrate that the Solicitor General did say, when he rose to explain, that he fully intended to do as other ministers do, and as his predecessors did, that is, deal with questions related to past activities of the department. That is the principle under which the government is operating and it is a principle which I understood the Solicitor General to enunciate.

Mr. Douglas (Nanaimo-Cowichan-The Islands): You would have to recast the whole sentence to get that meaning.

Mr. MacEachen: What I believe the Solicitor General was getting at—

Mr. Diefenbaker: Is this the final interpretation?

Mr. MacEachen: It is an interpretation based upon hearing what has been said. It is probable that each of us would benefit from re-reading the transcript. Inasmuch as other members have put forward their interpretations of what has happened, pending a further review it is surely reasonable that members on this side should take advantage of the opportunity to do the same thing, on the understanding, of course, that we might find that the transcript tells us something different.