

Point of Order—Mr. McGrath

Notwithstanding the sensitivity of the chairman, the fact is that I, and other members of the committee, this morning were denied the right to examine the president of this corporation in connection with a vote which was properly before the committee. If I cannot bring this appeal in the form of a point of order to Your Honour as the protector and custodian of our rights and privileges, then where do I take it? Obviously the chairman of the committee will carry on in this way with the advice and consent of the Minister of State for Urban Affairs because it is in the best interests of the minister and, as I have established, in the best interests of the chairman of the committee not to have this question raised because the broader question that we were getting at in committee this morning—which I am sure was not lost on the minister—was the relationship between this Crown corporation and the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs.

● (1512)

Without amendment, and without coming to the House with a bill, the government has taken this Crown corporation and used it as part of a line department. Without the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Minister of State for Urban Affairs has the ongoing responsibility of co-ordinating activities in the fields of housing and urban affairs. By the Government Organization Act, it was never intended to be a line department.

I appeal to Your Honour to rule on whether I, as a member of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, have a right to direct questions to the president of CMHC in connection with the votes of that Crown corporation which are now properly before the committee.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa-Vanier): Mr. Speaker, as chairman of that committee I should like to make some comment on the remarks which have been put forward by the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath). I take very seriously the allegations of partisanship which have just been made. I resent that. I do not think they were well intended. I hope the hon. member was not reflecting in any way on my chairmanship of that committee. His allegations were completely false.

The chairman of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs operates according to a set schedule, set by the steering committee and arrived at by consensus of all members of the House represented on the steering committee. We agreed to a certain series of witnesses, commencing with the hon. Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin), followed by the hon. Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Allmand), and the Minister of State for Urban Affairs (Mr. Ouellet) this morning. By agreement the witness called was the Minister of State for Urban Affairs. Whether the minister comes alone or with his officials is not a matter for the chairman to decide.

I agree with the hon. member that a quorum was not present, and therefore, it was very difficult for us to entertain a

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motion of debate on the question as to whether he could address the president of CMHC through me.

I have reviewed the documentation regarding the tradition of committees. As far as I know, the normal procedure is that questions are put through the chairman to the witness, who in this case was the Minister of State for Urban Affairs. At that time I could not entertain any other procedure or any change of procedure, first because there was no quorum, and second, because it was not raised.

I understand the sensitivity of the hon. member. His question reflects on members of all parties. He is attempting to get information from Crown corporations or from witnesses. In my ruling this morning I stood by the decision of the steering committee. The witness this morning was the Minister of State for Urban Affairs. If he wanted to ask his officials to answer questions, he could do so. That is what I said, but at no time did I prevent the hon. member for St. John's East from asking questions. He had his ten minutes. He used it for his purposes. As far as I am concerned, it was a fair and just decision.

Mr. Walter Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) has put the case very well in terms of the facts, as I investigated them. In the course of dealing with this matter, perhaps Your Honour will want to defer a decision with respect to it.

Your Honour should look at the *Votes and Proceedings* of yesterday, when we dealt in committee with vote No. 10, as was indicated by the hon. member for St. John's East. Vote No. 10 was in respect to the estimates for the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. For some reason or other, the only person who is listed as a witness is the hon. Minister of State for Urban Affairs (Mr. Ouellet), whereas in every other case, such as the Standing Committee on Regional Development and the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Forestry, the hon. Minister of Fisheries and the Environment (Mr. LeBlanc) appears in one case and the hon. Minister of Regional Economic Expansion (Mr. Lessard) appears in the other case, as well as officials of the Cape Breton Development Corporation. This tells me that someone indicated to the committees branch and the committees branch has assumed, notwithstanding the fact that the president of CMHC was accompanying the minister, as he has done before, that the minister would be examined, before the chairman of the committee even had an opportunity to rule on the matter whatsoever.

It follows from that, to the casual observer in any event, there is at least a possibility of a concerted attempt to keep the president of CMHC out of the line of questioning. That was done successfully. Nonetheless, the man was there and he was introduced by the chairman of the committee. Then the Chairman took the unusual step of deciding who would be examined.

Mr. Gauthier (Ottawa-Vanier): A question of privilege, Mr. Speaker—