

respect for the law, I wonder if I might ask his seatmate, the President of the Privy Council, a question with respect to the decision made by the Chief Electoral Officer that only electoral expenses incurred after May 11, 1978, the day the Prime Minister decided that a triumphant march to an election might turn into a rout, would be counted toward the spending limits for the eight by-elections.

I ask the government House leader whether the government sanctions the Chief Electoral Officer's actions which ignore the force and effect of the order in council that set March 1, 1978, as the date for the issuance of the by-election writs.

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Deputy Prime Minister and President of Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer is an officer of parliament. He is not in any way the subject of direction of the government as such, and the government in this case has not indicated in any way any particular view as to how the Chief Electoral Officer ought to carry out his operations. That would be quite unacceptable because of the special status which he occupies, and we have not in any way indicated to the Chief Electoral Officer a view as to any consultations he may have had with political parties.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I am not concerned with what consultations he may have had with respect to the matter; I am concerned that this officer of parliament, perhaps in good faith—I would suggest that until it is proven to the contrary, that is the case—has set himself above parliament and has really set himself above the courts with respect to what the law is.

The minister has indicated that there was no approach made to him by the government to influence this decision. In that event, is the government intending to review the decision, because the President of the Privy Council happens to be a member of parliament too? Is he intending to review the decision, as a member of parliament, to ascertain its correctness with respect to the law and, if so, is he intending to join in an approach by parliamentarians to this officer of parliament with respect to the appropriate interpretation of the law? If the minister has not had time to consider that matter, would he consider it and advise me as to what the decision of the government might be?

Mr. MacEachen: Mr. Speaker, I believe the Chief Electoral Officer has been an outstanding officer of the House of Commons. He has in this particular case attempted, in consultation with representatives of the political parties, as I understand it, to reach a *modus operandi* with respect to the occurrence of the by-elections. I want to put his efforts in context, which were intended to be helpful in the current situation. I repeat, in so far as I am concerned as President of Privy Council and as the conduit for the Chief Electoral Officer to the House of Commons, I will not interfere in any way with his operations. In so far as this party is concerned, we intend to fulfil all the requirements of the law with respect to the Election Expenses Act. After all, it was this government that brought in the Election Expenses Act and we intend to observe it to the limit.

Oral Questions

Mr. Gillies: How about to the letter?

Mr. MacEachen: To the letter, to the limit and to the spirit, in all its aspects.

Mr. Gillies: Good.

Mr. MacEachen: We all want to support the Chief Electoral Officer in the work that he is doing, and it might be a very useful project to have the Chief Electoral Officer appear before a committee of the House. If general suggestions were made there, or if a consensus was developed to meet a particular situation, then of course the proper procedure would be for the House itself to take steps to change the law and the situation. It is not my intention, in the absence of all-party consensus, to move to change the law in this particular respect.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, the government House leader has given an undertaking that he is prepared to consider the question of bringing the matter before a standing committee of the House of Commons. Would he undertake, as the government House leader, to discuss this matter with the chairman of the appropriate committee as a first step to removing what is a misunderstanding, notwithstanding the good quality of the Chief Electoral Officer with which we all agree, to ensure that in fact the law which was brought in by this government and supported by all members of the House can be observed. If the law is not satisfactory, then it can be changed in an appropriate way, rather than by administrative action which this appears to be. Will he give me that undertaking?

Mr. MacEachen: Mr. Speaker, I will undertake to consult the party representatives with a view to having the Chief Electoral Officer appear before the appropriate committee to discuss this matter with members. It is vitally important at this stage for all of us to restate our confidence in the integrity of the Chief Electoral Officer.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacEachen: The electoral process will not carry the confidence of the Canadian public unless he has that support. Certainly, the government extends to him the confidence that is required in this situation, but unfortunately some recent press reports are not calculated to maintain proper confidence in the Chief Electoral Officer.

The second point is that if members of the committee, in consideration of the problem, want to move in a particular way, then I will certainly facilitate an amendment that will change the law.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

An hon. Member: It is twelve o'clock.