

Inquiries of the Ministry

known to the house and which I need not repeat. This matter has been discussed; I have invited discussion on both sides because it is an interesting point.

The house is always jealous of its right to hear information and to have information from the government first and before others, and conceivably a matter of privilege might arise in circumstances where information had been withheld from the house.

Main estimates are tabled and a motion, which is not debatable, is made to refer them to a committee concurrently with the tabling of the estimates. The Minister of Finance has given in confidence, as I understand it, to the press a summary or statement of the contents of the estimates for release only at the time the estimates are tabled.

If there is any matter of privilege it is whether the Minister of Finance had any right or is offending the privileges of the house in giving the press that information in confidence, in summary form, in advance.

In the absence of any clear precedent and in the absence of any motion I think the matter might rest there. I do not find a prima facie right on the part of the house to insist that the government, when it tables the full information, shall not give a summary of it to the press; and, as I have said, there is no motion in this respect. If the hon. member wishes to present a motion I will give further thought to it; because it is important, as are all matters of privilege affecting the rights of members of the House of Commons. But I think it has been sufficiently discussed and might be left at that point, if hon. members agree.

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): Mr. Speaker, may I say one thing, because otherwise there is likely to be a misapprehension remaining on the record regarding what was said by the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River. I might say that on making inquiry I am informed that the practice which has been observed today is the practice that existed before I became Minister of Finance and which has been followed in the past. It was never the practice to give advance notice of these estimates or statements to the Leader of the Opposition or to anyone on the opposition side. That is not and has never been the practice. I have simply done in all respects today what has been done by my predecessors, both in making a copy of the estimates and a summary available to the press gallery in secrecy and in confidence, and in making the estimates available to hon. members when I did.

Mr. Pearson: May I ask the Minister of Finance if he is aware of the fact that the figures for expenditures shown in the estimates appeared in the local press, which went

[Mr. Speaker.]

on the street before 2.30 this afternoon, with the total amount in print before the estimates were tabled in the House of Commons?

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): No, I am not aware of that, and I would want a good deal more corroboration of that statement before I would be prepared to assume that there has been any breach of secrecy in this respect. The release time which was given to the press gallery was the moment of my tabling these estimates in the house, and I would be very reluctant to believe for one minute that this information was given out by any member of the press gallery in any public form before I tabled it here this afternoon.

The Leader of the Opposition has sent me a copy of the *Ottawa Citizen*, which is the same newspaper that had an advance copy of a speech made in the house last session by the hon. member for Trinity (Mr. Hellyer). I may say that this statement appearing in the *Ottawa Citizen* does not bear out at all what the Leader of the Opposition has just claimed in respect of it. It is headed by the following words: "Fleming Presents Estimates for '61", and continues:

Record estimates for the 1961-62 fiscal year to begin April 1 were presented to the commons today by finance minister Fleming.

Government spending in the current fiscal year, ending March 31—

That is not the present estimates; that is not the year in respect to which I tabled the estimates this afternoon.

—is already estimated at nearly \$6 billions, and indications in today's main estimates for the next fiscal year point to an even higher figure.

As hon. members will note, it does not give the figure. This article is obviously conjecture in which anyone could have indulged, in advance of the release of the actual figures. Therefore I say this, Mr. Speaker. Not only has the Leader of the Opposition drawn a red herring here this afternoon, but these aspersions which he has cast on the *Ottawa Citizen* and its representative in the press gallery are contemptible.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Benidickson: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order. We were dealing with the business which arises on the calling of orders of the day. The Leader of the Opposition asked a question, and the Minister of Finance has given his reply. Was the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River rising to ask a supplementary question?

Mr. Benidickson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I was about to ask the Minister of Finance, who has before him the *Ottawa* publication—

Some hon. Members: The *Citizen*.