

THE SENATE

Thursday, February 13, 1986

The Senate met at 2 p.m., the Honourable Martial Asselin, Speaker *pro tempore*, in the Chair.

Prayers.

THE SENATE

ALLOCATION OF ROOMS—QUESTION OF PRIVILEGE

Hon. Royce Frith (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I rise on a question of privilege for your consideration. First, the factual background.

Since this session—I believe “session” is the right word—since the election of 1984 and the beginning of our deliberations thereafter, the Senate Liberal caucus has set up a Question Period group to deal with the preparation of questions for Question Period. When the Senate is sitting, this group meets at 1.30 every afternoon in Room 263-S.

Senator Langlois: Are there any bugs?

Senator Frith: Senator Langlois has asked if we have swept it for any bugs. No, we have not.

Today Senator MacEachen's office was given word that the Senate Conservative caucus required the room, and we were to clear out or not be there.

An. Hon. Senator: Nice guys!

Senator Frith: This word came from the government whip's office, Senator Phillips' office, not from him. Senator MacEachen then sent word back inquiring as to whether he was asking us to change our practice and to give up the room that has been reserved or whether he was telling us that we were to clear out or not be there. The response was simply, “We, the Conservative members of the Senate, require the room.”

I had the impression that it was a noon hour caucus and perhaps a luncheon caucus. Consequently, I sent a note off to Senator Phillips' office in which I said:

Senator MacEachen's office tells me that you require 263-S for a special noon-time caucus today.

As you know, the room is reserved for our Question Period group at 1.30 p.m. each sitting day.

We will require it for the same purpose today. No doubt you will have cleared out by that time.

Then I received the following message on my Code-A-Phone:

This is Senator Phillip's office. In response to the note from Senator Frith to Senator Phillips, Senator Phillips has instructed me to advise that the P.C. Senate caucus requires their room—

The antecedent of “their” is not clear.

Senator Guay: It sounds clear to me.

Senator Frith: Is he saying “their room” meaning our, the Conservative's, room or does he mean by “their room” the Liberal's room? That is not clear. It is required by Senator Phillips and his caucus.

Senator Flynn: Lord have mercy!

Senator Frith: In any event the message goes on:

—and they will be meeting there at 1.30 and 260N has been reserved for the Question Period group, and the constables have been instructed to make it available to them. Thank you.

Senator Flynn: Thank you!

Senator Perrault: Shocking!

Senator Frith: That is the entire message.

Honourable senators, I believe that we need some clarification of how we are to determine whether or not a room is reserved. Is it the practice in the Senate—and I do not believe that it is—that the government whip can tell anybody, including a caucus that has reserved a room, that they are to clear out to make room for someone else—in this case his colleagues on the Conservative side? There is no question that the job of allocating rooms is a difficult one. The informal committee chairmen's group decided some time ago to assign the duty, as far as committees are concerned, to the whips. Senator Lafond had been responsible for that, but it was decided to re-assign that responsibility to the whips.

I think we should understand that the government whip, be he or she a Conservative or a Liberal—depending on the times—does not have the right to do what Senator Phillips did today. If I am wrong about that, and if he does have that right, then we will have to pursue the matter in some other way.

Hon. Orville H. Phillips: Honourable senators, I am glad that Senator Frith raised this matter. I am rather disappointed that he is acting as a proxy for Senator MacEachen; I always find it difficult to deal with a proxy.

As I was leaving my office last evening I was given a message inquiring whether that was a request or an order. I told my assistant to say that it was because of a caucus meeting. I think everyone understands that a caucus meeting has priority over other meetings. That has been the situation since I first came to Parliament Hill in 1957, and I am sure that is still the situation.

Senator Frith: In the event of two caucuses?

Senator Phillips: That was not a caucus meeting, Senator Frith; that was just a meeting.

Senator MacEachen: Who decided that?

Senator Frith: I am glad I brought it up.