

Mr. Speaker: I have no hesitation in agreeing to allow some time for the response of the Solicitor General (Mr. Blais) to the question put forward today. In any case, I would need some time to assess it in terms of my own responsibilities with regard to the request made. Therefore I am quite happy to see the matter reserved for a day or two until I have had some indication whether the information asked for by the hon. member for Nickel Belt (Mr. Rodriguez) today is forthcoming.

In the interim I see no difficulty at all in reserving to the hon. member the right to carry on the question of privilege of which he gave the Chair notice a week ago, which is the reason I took it as a priority item today in terms of notices of questions of privilege which have been filed with me.

MR. BROADBENT—ALLEGED MISSTATEMENTS OF FACT BY
MINISTER OF FINANCE

Mr. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa-Whitby): Mr. Speaker, I rise, as I indicated to you in a letter this morning, on a separate question of privilege. In a speech delivered in Montreal on Monday night the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chretien) devoted his time to making some assertions about the nature of the Canadian economy. Arising from those assertions it seems to me that there is a very serious question of privilege, at least on a prima facie basis, which concerns all members of this House.

I would like to quote three portions of the minister's speech. First, he said that Canada's economic recovery is gaining momentum. Second, at page three of the text of his speech the minister said that "unlike the situation 12 months ago, we are going into the new year from a strong base of real growth". Third, the minister said that the outlook for investment is improving.

I am very concerned about these statements because they were not rhetorical in nature. They were not the kind of statement that politicians of whatever party make from time to time in exaggerated claims about the nature of their virtues or about the nature of the vices of their opponents. They were statements of purported fact, and they were made just two nights ago by the Minister of Finance, the man who holds the most responsible financial position in Canada.

The concern I have about those allegations of fact is that they are not only slightly contradicted in emphasis by other evidence, but they are flatly contradicted by reports which have been produced by another government agency, Statistics Canada. One report appeared on Friday of last week, and another just appeared yesterday. I will not go into both those reports at length. I could do so, and in chapter after chapter and verse after verse they would flatly contradict the alleged factual assertions made by the minister. I will refer to just two such factual contradictions. Yesterday's Statistics Canada report showed that business investment in the last quarter of 1977 declined at an annual rate of 10.8—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Regardless of the merits of the statistics in the argument the hon. member is about to put forward,

Privilege—Mr. Broadbent

surely he will agree that in principle what he is doing is entering into argumentation with regard to the statements made by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chretien). If I were to extend to the hon. member the right to raise this disagreement by way of a question of privilege, I would have to extend to every hon. member every day, under the guise of privilege, the opportunity to take issue, no matter how serious and fundamental, with statements made by ministers or by other members of the House both inside and outside the House. No matter how fundamental that disagreement may be and no matter how well documented or how persuasive the argument may turn out to be, it still remains argument; and I cannot recognize argument as privilege, for to do so would invite the same thing from every member every day.

Mr. Broadbent: Mr. Speaker, I fully respect what you have said, but I wonder if you will permit me perhaps another 60 seconds to try to make a case of privilege because I do not think this is just a matter of argument.

As Your Honour knows, this House has a rule that no minister or member ought deliberately to misinform other members in the House, and if there is any breach of that rule, a bona fide question of privilege can be raised.

The concern I have is that yesterday in the question period the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) indicated that the government was aware of the information contained in the Statistics Canada report, but during the same period of awareness the Minister of Finance was uttering something which was not just a matter of emphasis but a factual contention which was a flat contradiction of what Statistics Canada was saying was going on in the economy.

If Your Honour rules in my favour, my prima facie question of privilege would be that we as members of this House cannot continue to do our jobs properly if we are provided systematically with contradictory information from the Minister of Finance and from other government agencies. This is an extremely serious issue, particularly at this time when the problems in the Canadian economy are very real indeed. Perhaps above all else at this time, if we are going to come to grips with the very serious problems facing us, we need honesty.

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member is exaggerating somewhat. Statistics Canada published its figures on Tuesday. I did not see them before they were published, so the hon. member cannot accuse me of having seen them. He cannot accuse department heads because the speech I made in Montreal was about policy which I, in concert with my bureaucrats, had developed. There was absolutely nothing misleading in that.

I said that for the fourth quarter of the year I expected to see 4 per cent to 5 per cent real growth. I have said that many times. However, I did not at that time have the facts which were published by Statistics Canada. I had some indication that the figure was to be between 4 per cent and 5 per cent. Unfortunately the figure turned out to be 3.2 per cent, which made the average 4.3 per cent for the last half of the year.