

Privilege—Mr. Huntington

all members of this House is to have the estimates made available to them in the House of Commons. If the hon. member is suggesting that there should be no press lock-up, that is another matter and perhaps it should be addressed by the committee to which he suggests his question of privilege be referred.

Mr. Harvie Andre (Calgary Centre): I will be very brief, Madam Speaker, but I want to address a couple of points raised by the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston). He suggested that the question of a lock-up and access to it by Members of Parliament or others, is a matter of courtesy, not of privilege. Surely that goes to the root of the matter. What we are suggesting is that it is a matter of privilege that Members of Parliament be extended the same courtesy as that extended to members of the press. Surely the President of the Treasury Board can understand that.

I think advantage should be taken of the suggestion of the President of the Treasury Board that this matter be examined by the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. The fundamental question is whether Members of Parliament are entitled as a matter of right to expect the same courtesies respecting the supply of information and official documents, as are members of the press. Or do we, as was suggested by a member of the New Democratic Party, need to be elected to the press Gallery in order to gain access to government information?

That is a fundamental question which ought to be examined by the committee. It is absurd to suggest that members of the media have privileges and the right to expect courtesies beyond those which Members of Parliament, elected by the people of Canada, have.

The President of the Treasury Board spoke about practices in the past. Granted, there have been practices in the past, budget practices and practices which, among other things, were examined most recently by the Lambert Commission's inquiry into the government's control and account ability for public expenditures. The fundamental recommendation of the Lambert Commission, whose recommendations in total were endorsed by the Liberal Party and by our party, was that it was absolutely essential there be a clear, open, honest approach to the whole question of government spending, that it was necessary for this openness to exist. I do not think I am being unduly partisan in suggesting that one of the reasons for this practice of a press lockup in the past, without the benefit of opposition members there, is that it is easier for knowledgeable staff or persons being paid a salary to make their minister and the government look good. They can present a case to the media without criticism from the opposition, resulting in press stories which are perhaps advantageous to the government. This clearly flies in the face of the recommendation of the Lambert commission which says that in order to bring government spending under control, there must be this openness and honesty about spending so the public really knows what is going on, and only through that knowledge can the question of public expenditures be brought under control.

● (1520)

For those two very good reasons I would heartily recommend to the Chair—and I think it is important that the Chair consider the role of members vis-à-vis the media—that the recommendation of the President of the Treasury Board be accepted. This matter should be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections so that procedures more in keeping with the thrust of the Lambert Commission, and I might suggest with the thrust of the freedom of information legislation currently before committee, are followed and so that members of this House of Commons will not feel they are in an inferior position to members of the fourth estate.

Mr. Doug Anguish (The Battlefords-Meadow Lake): Madam Speaker, I share the concerns of the hon. member who has raised this point of privilege. Until the hon. member brought this matter to my attention, I was not aware there was a lock-up. As yet, I have not seen the estimates which are to be tabled in this House. The hon. member who raised the point of privilege, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston), and I had lunch today about two hours ago during which we were given a press release kit to go over which was to help us come up with some kind of intelligent response to the tabling of the estimates in this House.

I understand this may not be a question of privilege, as the President of the Treasury Board pointed out, but if it is a courtesy extended to the press, I would at least expect that same courtesy to be extended to Members of Parliament so that we can respond intelligently. I am sure the reason for the press lock-up is so that they can respond intelligently to the media and to Canadians at large. As the critic at the Treasury Board for the New Democratic Party I think I should have that same right. It will enable me to go through this very complex document and to give an intelligent response in the House of Commons. The media can then pick up my views on this document as well. As a critic, I feel somewhat offended that I was not even informed about the press lock-up on the estimates which took place this morning. Therefore, Madam Speaker, I would ask you to give serious consideration to the point which has been raised.

Hon. Sinclair Stevens (York-Peel): Madam Speaker, I join in supporting my colleague's question of privilege. If you find a prima facie case in favour of his position, I will support his motion when it is made. I was not refused entry to the lock-up at the same time as my colleague, and I went to room 200 in the West Block at 1.45 p.m. in the hope that I could at least pick up a few details concerning the estimates yet to be tabled. I was confronted at the door by a Mr. Gerald Simoneau of the Treasury Board. He stated that I had no right to see the estimates, that they were solely for the press.

Some hon. Members: Shame!

Mr. Stevens: The President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) stated the case clearly when he said it was simply a matter of courtesy to the press. This minister, and presumably