

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, March 15, 1971

The House met at 2 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. DINSDALE—GOVERNMENT POLICY RESPECTING BILINGUALISM IN PUBLIC SERVICE—OPPORTUNITY TO QUESTION PRESIDENT OF TREASURY BOARD

Hon. W. G. Dinsdale (Brandon-Souris): Mr. Speaker, I would like to raise a question of privilege affecting all members of the House of Commons. Last Friday the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) questioned the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury) concerning plans to assure that there would be no discrimination against public servants in the government's implementation of the program for bilingualism in the Public Service. This question arose from the recent statement by the President of the Treasury Board when he appeared before the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates and the case of Mr. Demicher who was arbitrarily released from his position with the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce. In reply, the President of the Treasury Board invited the right hon. member to appear before the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates for an answer.

I raise this question, Mr. Speaker, because last Thursday I attended the meeting of the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates to discuss the implications of the government's statement with reference to promotion opportunities as they affect long service public servants, senior public servants and public servants living in unilingual areas of the country such as western Canada. The question was raised in committee of my right to pursue this line of questioning at length inasmuch as I was not a member of that committee. Furthermore, when the committee abruptly adjourned at 11 a.m. I was in the midst of my questioning and was informed that because of his many other responsibilities the minister would not be returning to the committee.

My question of privilege is the following, Mr. Speaker: Parliamentary committees are an extension of the committee on ways and means of the whole House. Prior to the downgrading of the rights and privileges of private members under the rule changes, when the examination of estimates was removed from the House, it was the responsibility of the minister to appear before Parliament to defend his estimates. Only ministers of the Crown can deal with policy matters, and it is a fundamental denial of the principle of responsibility when Members of Parliament are confronted in committee more and more by officials rather than by the responsible minister.

I therefore move:

That this matter be referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization to ensure that the traditional rights of members of the House of Commons in connection with the granting of supply be restored.

• (2:10 p.m.)

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member appreciates that the motion can be put only if there is a ruling from the Chair when there is established a prima facie case of privilege. He also knows that when there is a prima facie case of privilege the traditional practice is that the matters which have been raised by way of a question of privilege are referred not to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, as suggested by the hon. member, but rather to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, the committee that normally looks at matters of that kind.

The hon. member has raised by way of a question of privilege the fact that a minister was not in attendance in a committee of the House to answer questions which the hon. member wanted to submit to him. The hon. member suggested that the difficulty he has encountered is the result of the changes in the rules of the House of Commons. I respectfully suggest to him that this is hardly a matter which can be raised by way of a question of privilege.

The hon. member may feel aggrieved in the sense that he did not have an opportunity to obtain the information he was seeking, but I would then think that the matter becomes a question of substance, and the only way in which a debate may be initiated in the House is by way of a substantive motion. In fact, the motion suggested by the hon. member is essentially a substantive motion and in the circumstances it should not be raised as a question of privilege. I must rule that there being no prima facie case of privilege the motion cannot be put at this time.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

GRAIN

TABLING OF STATEMENT ON PRAIRIE GRAIN RECEIPTS STABILIZATION PLAN

Hon. Otto E. Lang (Minister of Manpower and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 41 (2) I wish to table a statement in both official languages on the Prairie grain receipts stabilization plan.