

Point of Order—Mr. Riis

• (1520)

If the Government is permitted to transfer these questions to Motions for Papers, in my humble opinion it is effectively putting off the need for dealing with the legitimate requests for information contained in the questions. The Notices of Motions are dealt with at the pleasure of the Government, which is under far less pressure to delay with these matters as compared to Questions on the Order Paper. Evidently we have to address the time constraints under which the Government operates. We all know that if a Member wants to put a question and he or she decides that he or she wants an answer within 45 days, the Government must do everything in its power to try to answer those questions.

Previous experience in the House has shown that many times the Government does not respond within the 45 days. That is another problem you may want to address on another occasion. I believe there are solutions to that problem, a few of which I have mentioned. For example, if a question has not been answered after 45 days then it should be considered like an oral question that does not receive a satisfactory answer and transferred for adjournment debate. A system could be implemented whereby such questions which indeed lapse after 45 days could be put to the adjournment debate at six o'clock in the order in which they are received. That is a topic for further discussion with the committee if the Speaker judges it appropriate to transfer that.

Let me return to Standing Order 39(6). This is an archaic rule, after some 80 years of not being used. The Government is merely trying to find yet another way to deny Parliament legitimate information. It is indeed sometimes very difficult and sometimes tedious for the Government to gather the answers to these questions. I will not bore the House with all the questions that have been asked, but most of the ones I reviewed can indeed be answered. They may have detailed information attached to them, which the Parliamentary Secretary does not want to read into the record, but we have had a practice in the House of printing them as read. I see no difficulty in continuing with that procedure.

The request to you by the Parliamentary Secretary is unjustified today, in my view. In my opinion, the Speaker's role in the concept of reform is to protect the rights of the individual and protect the rights of the minority. As far as I am concerned, the Speaker should turn down this request to transfer written questions Nos. 45, 52, 53,

62, 64, 83 and 88 to Notices of Motions for the reasons I have stated.

All the questions involved are short and to the point. They request straightforward information. They should be responded to quickly by the Government. If they require lengthy answers, such answers should be made Orders for Return as I suggested before and has been done virtually without any difficulty for many years. This practice which has developed over the years is acceptable.

In my view and the view of my caucus, to proceed with the transfer of these questions to Motions would be a step backward.

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest the other day when the Hon. Member for Peace River (Mr. Cooper) stood up and said:

Mr. Speaker, I am wondering if you could look at Questions Nos. 45, 52, 53, 62, 64, 83, and 88 in relationship to Standing order 39(6).

He went on to say:

I would ask that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

Based on those comments, it seemed to be a reasonable thing to do, until we examined just what was involved in such a request.

I do not want to impute any motives to my hon. friend in terms of this request. I want to make some critical comments and then offer what may be a solution to this concern that the Hon. Member for Peace River brought to the attention of the House.

I am speaking on behalf of NDP caucus Members. We have had a chance to consider this issue and we have determined that our response ought to be not to support such a request. I want to explain why we have come to that conclusion.

The Government has asked you to transfer the seven questions on the Order Paper to Notices of Motions for the Production of Papers. The Government is effectively co-opting you in its attempt to weaken the ability of Members to ask and receive answers to questions put to the Government. It is a time-honoured tradition that Members, including Members of the government benches, have an opportunity to present legitimate questions to the Government for response. I suggest that on balance, this has been done effectively. There are times when we find answers to questions unacceptable, but as a process I think it works well.