

Statement on Paving of Alaska Highway

In the course of his remarks the hon. member read from a letter written to someone by the officer in charge of Canadian affairs in the department of state, Washington. The hon. member did not table the letter from which he read, and I am therefore at somewhat of a disadvantage in fully commenting upon it. According to the part which he did read, this letter mentioned that, and I quote: "Discussions have also been held in the past with officials of the Canadian government", concerning the question of paving the Canadian portion of the Alaska highway. Now I really do not understand this vague reference, but it may refer to some conversations which I understand took place as long ago as 1959 under the previous administration. In any case, as my original reply made clear, neither I nor any of the officials of my department, nor any of the officials of other departments whom we have consulted, have any knowledge of recent conversations of this type.

My hon. friend also quoted from another section of this letter a reference which is factually correct and which is not at all inconsistent with what I said. Not long ago officials of the United States embassy inquired from officials of my department whether a reported statement made by the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources was a new governmental decision in regard to paving the Alaska highway. My officials, on the basis of information supplied to them by the department of northern affairs, answered this inquiry from members of the United States embassy in the negative. I do not consider that a negative response to an inquiry as to whether there has been a change of policy can be termed "discussions", "negotiations" or "consultations" in any normal usage of these words. My answer to question No. 1,235 on October 21 was correct in all respects, with one exception, namely that in the last sentence I inadvertently referred to page 3165 of *Hansard* when I should have referred to page 3156.

Mr. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, I think I should reply very briefly to the minister. This differentiation which he makes between the words "consultations", "negotiations" and "discussions" is an exercise in semantics, a trait for which my hon. friend is noted.

Mr. Martin (Essex East): Mr. Speaker, I took no exception to what my hon. friend said, and I do not take exception now. However, I have sought to give him a forthright answer today, and I should have thought he would reply in kind.

Mr. Nielsen: Mr. Speaker—

An hon. Member: Sit down.

[Mr. Martin (Essex East).]

Mr. Nielsen: I do not think I will sit down, Mr. Speaker. I think I am entitled to reply without commands from the government side to sit down.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not wish to interrupt the hon. member because it is a basic question of privilege, and it is in the interest of everyone to clear it up. However, it would be helpful if the hon. member would say that he either accepts the statement or he does not, because I do not think this is the time to debate it.

Mr. Nielsen: I have no intention of debating it. If members on the government side would not shout across at me to sit down I might be given an opportunity to answer the minister.

The explanation given by the minister today did not deal with that portion of the letter from the officer in charge of Canadian affairs, department of state, Washington, which I read into the record on October 29, as follows:

Following a recent report of an alleged renewed interest on the part of the Canadian Minister of Northern Affairs and National resources, Arthur Laing, the department requested the embassy in Ottawa to seek clarification from responsible Canadian officials. Upon inquiry the embassy learned that the story was apparently based on a passing comment to a reporter and was not an official statement.

Then followed this portion of the letter which I read into the record:

The embassy has been informed that this statement reflects the official position of the Canadian government.

This is what the Canadian embassy informed the officials in Washington, according to this portion of the letter which I read into the record. This indicates to me that discussions have been held between the United States officials and the Canadian government, or consultations have been had, whichever word the minister chooses to use. His answer to my question No. 1235 indicated that there were no discussions and no consultations held whatever.

I am quite prepared to accept the minister's explanation, if that is what he wishes the house to believe, but I would implore him to look into that question and perhaps give me a more detailed answer—

Mr. Martin (Essex East): I have answered completely.

Mr. Nielsen:—otherwise, as was mentioned in your statement today, Mr. Speaker, members who do not get complete answers are going to have to place questions on the order paper over and over again. This is one of the reasons there are so many questions