

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Hon. Member for Trinity (Miss Nicholson) for making this clear. I am also in favour of a committee being able to request a Government response to certain recommendations in its report. I think there is a very good case for this if we look at the mandate of the Public Accounts Committee as set forth in Standing Order 96(3), which includes, among other matters, review of and report on the Public Accounts of Canada and all reports of the Auditor General of Canada which shall be severally deemed permanently referred to the Committee immediately they are laid on the Table.

Mr. Speaker, the point I am trying to make is that we have a report dealing with two agents of Parliament, the Auditor General of Canada, who examines all public accounts, and another agent of Parliament, the Public Service Commission, which has certain obligations under its legislation with respect to applying the merit principle. Mr. Speaker, this report contains a recommendation to the Government which is addressed directly to Treasury Board, not to the Commission.

Perhaps upon reading this transcript, the Commission will understand that there has been no oversight on our part and that we are indeed anxious to see the Commission meet the 30 September deadline as requested by the Committee, and that while the Government is being asked to give its response to 15 (b), the Commission will have an obligation to respond to all other recommendations by September 30, 1986.

[*English*]

Mr. Speaker: I thank Hon. Members. That is helpful to the Chair. The Chair will reserve and consider all the arguments.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS—MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY—
SPEAKER'S RULING

Mr. Speaker: I thought it would be useful if I now respond to the point of order raised by the Hon. Member for Hamilton Mountain (Mr. Deans) last Thursday. I would rather do this before Question Period.

In effect, the Hon. Member rose on a point of order to ask the Chair to consider the question of who could answer questions. I think that is the right way to put it. Perhaps the best way I can say this to the House is to start by simply reminding the House that questions are asked to the ministry as a whole or, if you will, to the Government. While questioners may, as a courtesy, indicate the Minister the questioner believes has responsibility for the matter, it is perfectly in order for the Government not to answer and in fact no specific Minister can be compelled or required to answer.

Should the Government decide to reply, it is in order for any Minister who has ministerial responsibility either directly or in an acting capacity to answer for the Government. There is, of course, occasionally a difficulty for the Chair because the Chair may not know who is in an acting capacity. In that case, as has

Point of Order—Mr. Deans

happened in one case, the Chair asks for an explanation as to the capacity in which the Minister was replying.

Finally, because of the over-all responsibilities of the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney), it is perfectly in order for the Prime Minister or for the Acting Prime Minister to respond to any or all questions. Again, neither the Prime Minister nor the Acting Prime Minister can be compelled or required to answer any question.

Mr. Ian Deans (Hamilton Mountain): Mr. Speaker, may I seek clarification on the ruling? Would I be correct, then, in assuming that if the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) were present in the House of Commons, quite clearly he would be the Acting Prime Minister and would therefore be the person who would have to answer if he were answering for anyone in the Government and that therefore the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Nielsen), in the presence of the Prime Minister, would not be able to rise and take the place of the Prime Minister since the Prime Minister was already present? The second point I would seek clarification on is whether there can be a Minister other than the Minister who is specifically charged with the responsibility for administering a department or ministry who could be deemed to be acting on behalf of that Minister in the Minister's presence, other than the Prime Minister, were he present, or the Deputy Prime Minister, were the Prime Minister absent. This is very key to some of the problems that arose.

I do understand that another Minister could be designated as an Acting Minister but he cannot be the Acting Minister if the Minister is present. That solves one part of my problem, I think. The other question then is if the Deputy Prime Minister is here but also if the Prime Minister is here, it would be up to the Prime Minister to answer or nobody to answer.

Mr. Speaker: In fairness, the day about which the Hon. Member was asking, the Deputy Prime Minister was here in his capacity as Acting Prime Minister and that is the point of order the Hon. Member raised and on which I have replied. I take it the Hon. Member is now asking me to consider a different point of order.

Hon. Ray Hnatyshyn (President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, the House Leader for the New Democratic Party has raised a novel point. The Hon. Member for Hamilton Mountain (Mr. Deans) will understand that in this Government, we have a Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) and a Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Nielsen). Obviously the Deputy Prime Minister assists the Prime Minister in the performance of a multitude of responsibilities.

Mr. Deans: But he has no status in the House of Commons.

● (1120)

Mr. Hnatyshyn: Mr. Speaker, indeed he has status in the House of Commons as Deputy Prime Minister and is so recognized as a member of Cabinet in that responsibility.