

Privilege—Mr. Ethier

Mr. Wise: If that is the reference in the press release, I am suggesting it is not a proper reference. The committee is still active. Indeed, a meeting was held last week and I think it is intended that it hold further meetings before a report will be issued to me.

What the hon. member refers to is a very lengthy document which is nothing more than a transcript of the meetings held by the consultative committee. There was a great deal of interest and inquiry as to whether this information would be made available. We do not want to keep it from reaching the public or, indeed, members of the House. I indicated that the information should be made public. The difficulty arose after we had made the decision to make it public, when we found a great deal of time would be required before it could be translated. I regret that very much, but I can assure the hon. member and the House that when the committee has completed its meetings and issues a report to me on its findings that report will be made public. But it will not be made public until such time as it can be presented in both official languages.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. By way of a question of privilege the hon. member has raised a rather important matter. The minister has made an intervention. I would certainly want to examine the facts in some detail and to weigh the arguments rather heavily. The hon. member for Glengarry-Prescott-Russell (Mr. Ethier) has made a very reasoned and well prepared intervention. I would want to examine it to see whether there is any area of privilege.

The minister has made a response, as he said, extemporaneously and without any warning. If there is a matter of continuing concern the minister has indicated he is prepared to appear before a committee. He has explained the nature of the document and the way it has come about. However, only after examining all of the presentation of the hon. member for Glengarry-Prescott-Russell and giving it some thought can I determine whether there are any other outstanding matters which would cause me to consider this a matter of privilege. If there are, I would want to give the minister an opportunity to answer after he has had the opportunity for the same kind of preparation.

I will reserve the matter until I have had an opportunity to consider it. If there is an argument in respect of the question of privilege to be answered by the minister, I will certainly give the minister and members an indication of some time that might be taken by parties to argue the matter further.

Hon. André Ouellet (Papineau): Mr. Speaker, on this very point, it was not too clear to me from your remarks whether you will be looking at the propriety of spending federal funds for caucus research activities. What is at stake here, and I think it is important that you give some guidance on this question, is whether a caucus of the government should carry out some research on its own with public funds. It is totally appropriate that a caucus should carry out such research, but whether it should use public funds for that purpose is the question.

[Mr. Wise.]

That is a matter that is very new. I do not think it has been done in the past. Surely we would like to have your guidance on the activities of the government because it seems this is not an isolated case. Other ministers have asked other members on the government side to embark on all kinds of research. We feel that while the Conservative party can do all kinds of research on its own with the help of backbenchers if they are not competent enough to be ministers and the government wants to use them or sweeten their non-promotion by involving them in some activities, but surely this ought not to be done with public funds.

Hon. Walter Baker (President of the Privy Council and Minister of National Revenue): Mr. Speaker, my friend raises a very good point and I can understand his concern as a minister of the former government which really did not do very much consulting with members in its own backbenches with regard to various matters. It is a fact that in former times members of the government used public funds outside the public service, and I think quite appropriately. They retained task forces outside the public sector, and engaged consultants and experts and paid them by the day, on a per diem basis. I think it is quite appropriate for governments to do that.

What worries me about the point being made by the hon. member, and alluded to by the hon. member who raised the question of privilege in the first place, is the suggestion that somehow or other it is improper for public purposes to engage professional consultants outside the public service. The Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Wise) has indicated he is going to release the report. It is quite proper to engage others outside the public service, but it is suggested that for some reason or other it is improper for the Government of Canada to consult members of Parliament.

● (1530)

If that is the proposition which the hon. member for Papi-neau (Mr. Ouellet) is asking to have examined, then I think that is astounding—that it would be proper to, for example, utilize the telephones or the printing facility of the Department of Agriculture to even print the press release, or a person versed within the public service to help the group stay on its path. According to the hon. member, that would be appropriate if the persons being utilized for this service were consultants from outside the public service, but if they are members of Parliament, then it somehow becomes improper.

I think that it is a question which should be looked at, because it should be settled once and for all, particularly in the context in which it was raised by the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Wise), who indicated when asked by the hon. member that he intended to make the report public. What the minister has said is that rather than choose someone from outside Parliament, he would rather choose someone from inside Parliament. I believe that is quite appropriate. I can understand why the hon. member is upset about that, because that has never happened in his party.

One of the changes the Prime Minister (Mr. Clark) and the new government have wanted to make is to engage as much as