

*Privilege*

the environmental panel was given to the Minister of the Environment and me a few days ago. We decided to make it public at the earliest opportunity.

As to the future of low level flying on the east coast out of Goose Bay, that will be decided by cabinet in due course.

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**PRIVILEGE**

BUDGET SECRECY

**Hon. Jean J. Charest (Sherbrooke, PC):** Mr. Speaker, you will remember that yesterday, as recorded in *Hansard*, I raised a question of privilege. I informed the House that I would raise this matter today after question period. Furthermore, I advised the whips of the other parties in the House, including the member for Guelph—Wellington, of my intention to raise this question of privilege because it is a question that relates to comments she made.

I rise today on a question of privilege. My query comes after reading a column that interestingly enough is entitled "Question Period". Question period is published in each weekly edition of a newspaper very well known here on the Hill, called the *Hill Times*. Members of this place will be familiar with a specific column, a vox populi, very similar to other vox populi we see in other media, where four individuals are asked a question, often of members of Parliament, often of individuals who work on the Hill, and they offer a response.

This week's question was: "Is there too much secrecy surrounding the budget?" The Bloc member for La Prairie, for example, answered:

The government has to maintain secrecy around the budget, not to favour certain investors. But there should be more transparency about the budget, to give a better idea of it without giving precise measures and details.

That is what the member for La Prairie is reported to have said.

Two other respondents, the members for Ottawa Centre and Provencher, also echoed their hon. colleague's understanding of secrecy. However, and this is the point of fact, the member for Guelph—Wellington gave a very troubling answer. In response to the clear and concise question: "Is there too much secrecy surrounding the budget?" she is quoted as saying:

I don't think so. There were some MPs who were told beforehand if major cuts were coming to programs in their ridings. They asked for that in caucus so they could prepare to ask questions.

I will just repeat the words because they are serious: "some MPs were told beforehand". Needless to say, I find this statement very troubling. I want to explain why I find it troubling but I also want to explain why I feel this to be a prima facie violation of my rights and privileges as a member of Parliament.

I want to quote another parliamentarian on this same issue who outlined the importance of the budget being confidential until budget night. By the way there is some real irony in this quote. This is a quote that I draw from the *Debates* at page 2283 of *Hansard* of December 12, 1979. It reads:

The confidentiality in which the details of a budget are kept secret is a constitutional practice which forms an integral part of a parliamentary system. Such practice is based on the principle that no individual, whoever he may be, must know in advance the details of a budget which he could use for personal gain.

● (1205)

That quote is from the right hon. Prime Minister, speaking in the House of Commons in 1979. I am sure the Prime Minister intended to include the Liberal caucus in his designation when he said "whoever".

To facilitate your work, Mr. Speaker, I also reviewed the past occasions when the House had to deal with budget leaks. Not to undermine the seriousness of any budget leak allegations, I am sure you will also agree that with the incidents of the past came also odd and unusual circumstances.

You will remember a photographer having snapped a picture of the Minister of Finance at the time, Mr. Lalonde, reviewing budget documents, and that incident being the object of debate in the House and another question of privilege. I also remember, Mr. Speaker, and I know that you were in the House at the time, a colleague of mine who had one of his documents fall into the hands of the media before the formal announcement of the budget.

In the past, when dealing with such rather isolated incidents, your predecessors ruled: "There was some doubt whether the convention of budget secrecy falls within the area of privilege". In fact, that is a quote which can be found in *Jurisprudence parlementaire de Beauchesne*, with which I am sure other members are familiar.

I quickly realized, and I am sure you will too, Mr. Speaker, that the very nature of this revelation makes this case a precedent which stands by itself. Never have we had, as far as I know in any research that we have done, any situation where a specific member of Parliament has boldly admitted to having obtained privileged information relating to the budget before it was formally announced. Nor are there any precedents where a whole caucus of this place, according to the statement made by the hon. member for Guelph—Wellington, was actually informed in advance of the contents of the budget. I have not found any precedents in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, we have nowhere to turn but to you. We are not in the presence of a leak of a titbit of information to a controlled number of people for what has never been more than a very short period of time, like the situations we have faced in the past. Neither have we ever been in the presence of what I reasonably fear to be a concerted effort on the part of someone to give a