

Question of Privilege

Mr. Knowles: Order.

Mr. Diefenbaker: I suggest, sir, that this should be accepted as a question of privilege and that the government would be able to accept a motion as weak, as watered down as this, without any loss of prestige, and would be in the same position as they were a short time ago when they were able to join with the New Democratic party in their amendment. This is weaker than that. It is so worded that the government has an easy way out. I appeal to the government to take advantage of the opportunity the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre has afforded them to get out of a very disagreeable position by means of a most agreeable resolution.

Mr. McIlraith: I will not avail myself fully of the same privilege the Leader of the Opposition made use of to discuss the government in a general way. I would point out to the hon. gentleman that it was his government which made the decision that this consulting firm should be retained by Trans-Canada Air Lines and who had refused to retain it themselves; it was his government which refused to take its responsibility as a competent government would have done. This step having been taken, we are today bound by it. I would point out further to the right hon. gentleman, if he wants to digress into this field, that this is precisely the thing we are finding in the departments so far as his government was concerned; that it could not make decisions or take responsibility.

Now, having said that, I want to address myself to the point at issue here, because the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre has raised a point that deserves the consideration of the house. The point he raised was this, that we should accept as a question of privilege that with regard to an officer of a crown corporation using information concerning the internal operations of that crown corporation, after this information has been procured for its own purposes, such officer is now precluded from using such information without making public the whole of the report. I would draw the attention of this house to what is the relevant point here: Crown corporations, if they are to operate effectively, must have a right in their internal operations to retain professional people to prepare reports for them and to use the information obtained in these reports. This is standard practice with relation to architects, engineers and so on.

Surely it cannot be argued here that they are not able to do so, that there is a breach of privilege when the officer of a corporation makes a reference to the kind of conclusion that he says he obtained in that way. I was

amazed at the argument of the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre which was tantamount to this, that the information obtained by a crown corporation from outside experts should be treated differently from information obtained from its own employees. That is the absurdity which is inherent in his argument. As a former minister of the crown he should know better. It typifies exactly what put this whole subject matter in this position in the city of Winnipeg, that splendid city where the people are concerned about this subject.

Mr. Knowles: Will the minister permit a question?

Mr. McIlraith: Yes.

Mr. Knowles: When the government declares that a report is to be treated as confidential, does that not apply to all those who have copies of the report?

Mr. McIlraith: That is the very point I am making.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. McIlraith: The government is in the position that if the government had committed a breach of that confidence, the position might be different. This question before the house, however, arises because an officer of a crown corporation made a reference to a document he properly obtained and which he presumably obtained for the purpose of using it. That is the distinction that is to be drawn.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Would the minister allow a question?

Mr. McIlraith: Yes, I will extend the courtesy, not extended by the right hon. former prime minister and the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre, to ask a question.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Hon. Leon Balcer (Three Rivers): Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak on this question of privilege.

Mr. Speaker: I do not want to limit the hon. member of course, but we have had an extended discussion.

Mr. Balcer: A point has been raised by the minister, and we have heard about the case of the people of Winnipeg, but I would like to say a few words for the people of Montreal on this matter.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Are you speaking to the point of privilege or are you describing the beauties of Montreal?

Mr. Balcer: The minister has raised doubts about the responsibility of the last government in matters of transportation, and said we were afraid to take our responsibilities.