

Privilege—Mr. Nielsen

was given "yes", the chairman had asked the minister that particular question. As a matter of fact, if the chairman of the committee does not understand the question he has the same right as a minister to ask the hon. member questioning for clarification. I do not think it is up to the Chair to interpret the question.

Madam Speaker: Is the hon. member for Yukon rising to speak twice on the same question of privilege?

Mr. Nielsen: Madam Speaker, in order to assist the Chair, since it was I who raised the question in the first place, I should like the opportunity to respond very briefly to the question you just put to the distinguished former occupant of your high office, the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert).

My immediate answer in respect of the interpretation of questions would be that in my opinion, no, it is not the Chair's job to interpret questions. But may I suggest, with the greatest respect, it is the Chair's job to note to whom the question is directed, and it is the Chair's job, in my respectful submission, to recognize the established precedent in this place, that it is proper and within our practice for chairmen of standing committees to respond to questions concerning the affairs of those committees. That is not the jurisdiction of the House. All the House does is make references to committees. That is the information we on this side were seeking yesterday during the question period process, whether such a reference had been sought.

The President of the Privy Council and government House leader, in replying on three separate occasions, refused to answer the specific question but gave us a story about the difficulties of conducting House business. He pointed out to us, for instance, that we had already had two days' debate on the matter and there was going to be another opposition day on Monday, none of which had anything at all to do with the question.

The danger I am attempting to impress upon the Chair with respect to the independence and integrity of standing committees arises from the sequence of events as they occurred yesterday. Your Honour will recall that on three separate occasions the chairman of that standing committee rose in an obvious attempt to answer the question, and on three separate occasions he was prevented from doing so by the President of the Privy Council. Finally, as recorded at page 12269 we find the President of the Privy Council saying, when he rose the fourth time—and the chairman of the standing committee had also risen.

Madam Speaker, I am sure that the hon. member for Northumberland-Miramichi is now able to answer the Leader of the Opposition—

The use of that word "now" is very significant. What he was saying in effect is, now that he has had his opportunity to tell the House why there is not going to be a reference—not saying it directly, but by referring to all sorts of other business—and the government position having been established, the chairman would be allowed to answer the question, but not before.

There are very serious implications to be drawn from that sequence of events yesterday having nothing to do at all with interpreting the question. The question was quite clear: has a request for a reference been made? In my respectful submission, the chairman was denied the opportunity of telling us whether a reference had been sought until he was allowed to do so by the President of the Privy Council. Therein lies the danger, and that is the danger which, in my submission, is best cleared up by the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

Madam Speaker: I will reserve on the question and study the arguments that have been presented.

MR. BENJAMIN—REFERENCE TO SENATE COMMITTEE OF RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE POLICY

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): I rise on a question of privilege.

Madam Speaker: I did not get notice of the hon. member's question of privilege.

Mr. Benjamin: I give it now, Madam Speaker, because it is related to the previous question.

Madam Speaker: Very well, I will recognize the hon. member for Regina West.

Mr. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, this is related to the previous question of privilege in the sense that it affects the chairman of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport. At page 12269 the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Clark) is recorded as asking the Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) about a request of the subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Transport for an order of reference, and the Minister of Transport said, as reported at page 12270:

It should be obvious to everyone here that what the opposition is trying to do is obtain a reference—

By the way, this was a request made by all-party agreement. He went on to state:

—so that a report can be written and they will have another kick at the can.

Madam Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member seems to be referring to the deliberations of yesterday, in which case I have to remind him that I require written notice of his question of privilege. If it involved the deliberations of today I could accept his question of privilege, but he is quoting from yesterday's *Hansard* and, therefore, I am afraid I cannot hear the hon. member at this time.

Mr. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I guess that makes it a point of order. This document in my hand indicates that the government refused an order of reference to inquire into VIA Rail and submit a report.

However, I find as a result of what has just arrived in my hand that the government House leader of the other place has taken action. The other place has authorized their transport committee to inquire into and report upon the national rail