

CULTURAL AFFAIRS

SPECIAL INITIATIVES FUND

Ms. Lynn McDonald (Broadview-Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of Communications and concerns the awarding of a \$100,000 grant to the National Theatre School in Montreal. My question does not concern the merits of the proposal but certain possible irregularities in the way it was awarded, and in particular the possibility of political interference from the Prime Minister's Office.

Would the Minister admit frankly that there are no published criteria for his Special Initiatives Fund so that groups that want to apply do not know if they are eligible, or will he come completely clean and admit that the sole criterion for funding is political connection with the Conservative Party?

[Translation]

Hon. Marcel Masse (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, with your permission, I will excuse the Hon. Member for being ignorant of the way grants are awarded at the Department of Communications, especially those awarded under the Special Program of Cultural Initiatives. The public knows about the forms, which are completed by the agencies. There are a great many people busy judging these agencies, and the Department is always happy to contribute to the development of Canada's cultural community.

[English]

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Ms. Lynn McDonald (Broadview-Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, I am afraid the Minister does not know what his own Department is doing. The former criteria expired on March 31 and now there are no criteria under which the Department is working. My office has tried to get hold of such criteria and was told that they are still being discussed.

I wonder if the Minister would check on the facts as they exist within his own Department. As well, I wonder if he would not admit that the Canada Council does things very differently. It does not receive phone calls from the Prime Minister's Office but uses established criteria and a merit system worked by juries. Would the Minister not concede that the arts community wants merit to be the sole criterion when making these awards, and that a Minister's slush fund has no place in the cultural policy of the country?

[Translation]

Hon. Marcel Masse (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, first of all, as long as the new criteria have not been released, the old ones will continue to apply. Second, the Special program of cultural initiatives is a different program with objectives that differ from those of the programs administered by the Canada Council, and I believe that both programs achieve their objectives fairly and squarely.

Oral Questions

● (1450)

[English]

HUMAN RIGHTS

REVIEW OF HELSINKI ACCORDS—CANADIAN POSITION

Mrs. Sheila Finestone (Mount Royal): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Secretary of State for External Affairs. Canada is host to the Human Rights Experts Meeting which will take place at the beginning of May. The agenda of that meeting is to review the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords to which we, as well as many other countries, including the Soviet Union, are co-signators, and to which we are mutually bound. As I understand it, the position of the Canadian delegation has been not to use specific names at these meetings, but rather to raise the issue of human rights as a matter of principle.

I have just returned from Russia. I have been witness and can testify to the fact that the prisoners of conscience, those whose crime is to study and practise their religion, and many refusniks who have suffered as a result of asking for exit permits, are prepared and hope that the Minister will raise their cases and name names. Will the Canadian delegation be prepared to raise specific cases at this experts' meeting?

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Secretary of State for External Affairs): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of other Members of the House I would like to pay tribute to the interest which was shown by the Hon. Member, and other Members from other Parties, on the parliamentary delegation which recently returned from the Soviet Union. I know their commitment to the question of Soviet Jewry, and I think she will understand that when I had the opportunity to raise questions of this kind, I also raised them with vigour and with all the force at my command.

With regard to the very important meeting which will be held in Canada, for the first time in North America, officially beginning in May, there are a variety of ways in which these cases can be raised—generally and specifically, in formal sessions and in corridors. I think the Hon. Member will agree with me, as will her Leader, that it is in the interests of Canada and in the interests of this process that we make some solid progress at the CSCE meeting of experts. I give her my commitment that we will find ways to raise individual cases with the Soviet Union and with others in a manner that will lead to a successful conference which will contribute positively to the CSCE process.

INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL EXCHANGES

Mrs. Sheila Finestone (Mount Royal): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased with and respect the energy and the efforts of the Minister.

[Translation]

But there is one thing, Mr. Speaker. How can the Minister propose to sign cultural, scientific and academic agreements and expect the Soviets to respect these, when they have never