

Oral Questions

When it was decided to appoint Mr. Wilson ethics counsellor, did the government know that he had his signing authority taken away from him by the Deputy Minister of Industry in 1992?

[English]

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada have full confidence in the integrity and the ethics of the ethics counsellor.

If the member of the opposition has anything to prove otherwise, let him come forward and make a charge.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I conclude from the Deputy Prime Minister's answer that the government knew and so did the Prime Minister. In this context, how could the Prime Minister hide this information from the opposition? Does the Deputy Prime Minister not recognize that when the Prime Minister consulted the opposition last June regarding the appointment of Mr. Wilson, he himself committed a serious breach of elementary rules of ethics by keeping this information from the opposition?

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, at noon, the Leader of the Opposition, in response to the Prime Minister's statement said, and I quote: "We never doubted the Prime Minister's integrity". He said it himself yesterday, he was even consulted on the appointment of the person in question.

The Prime Minister stated yesterday that he takes full and entire responsibility for his ministers' decisions. If the member opposite wants to attack civil servants who are not allowed to defend themselves, let him make accusations.

• (1425)

[English]

Mr. Preston Manning (Calgary Southwest, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has said that ministers are handed a set of confidential rules of conduct by the PMO when they assume their responsibilities. This is the minimum we would expect from a government that claims to have a serious interest in integrity. The public and Parliament have a right to see such guidelines so they can judge whether they are kept or broken.

In keeping with the Prime Minister's commitment to integrity and openness in government, would the Deputy Prime Minister agree to table these original guidelines given to the ministers in November so we can compare them with any proposed new guidelines and the government's position on the activities of the Canadian heritage minister?

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has promised a full and open debate of the new guidelines. I am sure in the context of those guidelines the commissioner for ethics is going to want to bring all the facts forward.

I hope there will be a full public debate because I know the guidelines will stand the test of time. However no guideline is the measure of a person's honesty.

The Prime Minister said that he was putting his integrity on the line because the hallmark of this government was not determined by what was written down in guidelines, but rather the fact that he and his ministers carried out their jobs with honesty and integrity. Nobody is challenging the honesty or the integrity of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Preston Manning (Calgary Southwest, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, they will not submit the guidelines.

Anyone who has studied the relations of ministers to quasi judicial tribunals knows there is only one guideline that ought to guide their communications. They should communicate only through statutes, orders in council and the submissions to public inquiries.

Yet yesterday the Prime Minister said the only guideline he gave ministers last November on such communications was that they should only do so through the duly authorized officials. Surely a Prime Minister who has spent 30 years in public life, some of them as justice minister, can come up with a better guideline than that.

Are the rest of the government's guidelines on ethics as weak and as poorly worded as this one? If so, what specifically is the government going to do to strengthen them?

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if you follow the rationale of the leader of the third party, basically you would tell the member for Okanagan—Similkameen—Merritt, who wrote to the minister on behalf of a constituent who was concerned about the increase in the cost of cable television, that the minister cannot pass his concerns along. The minister has a responsibility in the discharge of his duties to make sure that the cable television system is working properly.

The Prime Minister has set in place is a system where all future correspondence must go through the ethics counsellor. We think that is an interim fair measure. We are looking for a very full and open debate in the House on guidelines that will permit ministers to do their jobs and at the same time will make sure that members of Parliament get the service they deserve from ministers of the government.

Mr. Preston Manning (Calgary Southwest, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, what 99 per cent of ministers in other jurisdictions do