

lose the right to ask supplementary questions if they cannot make their original questions shorter. I noticed that being the case with previous Speakers in this House. I say this respectfully, but I wonder what has happened to our right to ask four questions.

Madam Speaker: First of all, I am not sure how many precedents there are of Speakers determining that a second supplementary question cannot be asked when the first question is rather long, but I find that an interesting suggestion.

Having regard to the second point raised by the hon. member that members of the NDP have a right to ask four questions, I think the hon. member's mathematics are not very accurate. I suggest that members of the NDP are entitled to ask about one third of the questions asked by members of the Conservative party. That does not work out to four questions on most days. There are days when I allow members of the NDP to ask four questions because they are entitled to a little more than one third. As a result, I do allow four questions once or twice a week, but usually three. That practice has been consistent since the beginning of the time I have been in this chair. I think if the hon. member looks at the statistics he will find that proportion is just about right.

If the hon. member looks back in *Hansard*, I think he will find that on many occasions when questions by members of the Conservative party have been unduly long and have taken up quite a lot of the time of the House during the question period I have allowed members of the NDP to ask about one third of the questions, in spite of the fact that on those days the proportion allowed members of the NDP did not work out to one third. On some days I have to work on the basis of time rather than on numbers.

● (1520)

I take note of the hon. member's suggestion about the length of questions. I myself find that questions tend to be very long, and I try to discipline hon. members.

An hon. Member: And the answers too.

Madam Speaker: The answers tend to be equally long and I do discipline members on the government side when answers are lengthy. Hon. members must realize that when the questions are long it is very difficult to cut off the answer, or to allow less time for the answer than for the question. However, I have heard hon. members complain when the answer on the other side was simply "No". They do not seem to appreciate that kind of short answer, so it is very hard for the Speaker to please everyone. I know that, and I just try to be as fair as possible.

Privilege—Mr. Crosbie

PRIVILEGE

MR. CROSBIE—NOTICE OF QUESTION TO BE RAISED

Hon. John C. Crosbie (St. John's West): Madam Speaker, I gave Your Honour notice this morning of an important question of privilege which involves the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Axworthy) and a letter from him which is misleading and in which false information is obviously deliberately contained.

The minister is not here today. I do not think he will be here until Thursday, according to his office. I will not be here Thursday and Friday because of other public business. I am prepared to go ahead and argue this either tomorrow—there is ample precedent for it—or I can wait until next Monday when presumably the minister will be here. I am quite willing to wait until next Monday, which appears to be the first day, unless Your Honour wants to direct otherwise.

Madam Speaker: There is no reason for the minister to be present in the House. If I need to hear the minister once the hon. member has raised his question of privilege, I can defer my ruling on that question of privilege and wait until the minister is heard. However, I can hear the question of privilege, and I urge the hon. member to raise his question of privilege today. If I need further clarification from the minister, I can hear that later; but if the hon. member wishes, I can hear his question today. In fact, I prefer that the matter not be deferred.

Mr. Crosbie: Madam Speaker, because I checked with the minister's office and was told he was not here, I did not bring the documents and the things I need to make the point now. I can go upstairs and get them and bring them down in a few minutes' time, or else I can go ahead tomorrow.

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Madam Speaker, may I speak very briefly on this point? While it is true that there is nothing in the Standing Orders or in our rules which prevents questions of privilege from being raised in the absence of a minister or a member who it is anticipated will be involved in the question of privilege, nevertheless it has been a long-standing practice traditionally in this House that courtesy is extended to the minister or member involved in a question of privilege and that the question not be raised until he is here. That is particularly true with respect to questions of privilege which involve allegations of untruthfulness, allegations of misconduct or allegations which affect ministers or members personally.

I have some knowledge of the nature of the subject matter of the question of privilege which the hon. member for St. John's West (Mr. Crosbie) intends to raise, and it does involve allegations of such a nature. In this particular circumstance I urge the Chair that it might be far more appropriate to await the return of the minister before the question is raised.

Madam Speaker: I am not saying that I rule out that the hon. member should defer his question of privilege to another day, especially owing to the fact that, thinking that the hon. minister would not be here, the hon. member does not have the