

Privilege—Mr. Gauthier

brought to the attention of the House and you, Sir, that at the previous meeting of this particular committee, of which I am a member and which meeting I attended, it was indicated very clearly that the members did not wish to look at this agreement until the full text was available. There was a sudden flip-flop, which led to this change yesterday, which is so destructive to the possibility of Canadians hearing this agreement appropriately.

Mr. Speaker: All Hon. Members will know that on occasion the Chair exercises considerable latitude, in Members bring forward a problem that has something to do with the workings of a committee, especially because we are in a reform stage and the Chair has found that it is sometimes helpful for these problems to be aired. I think that the fact that they have been aired has sometimes led to their resolution. However, this is not the place to be debating an issue which ought properly to be debated in the committee. I ask Hon. Members to cooperate with the Chair and conclude this matter.

[Translation]

COMMITTEE STUDY OF CANADA-U.S. PRELIMINARY TRADE AGREEMENT

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I rose a few moments ago to be recognized on the same question, but since I had given notice this morning, a few minutes before the Hon. Member for the New Democratic Party, I wanted to raise before the House the issue of consideration in committee of the so-called preliminary document or agreement signed by Canada and the United States.

Mr. Speaker, with respect, I submit that since we have broadened the terms of reference to enable committees to examine practically anything they please or almost any subject that rises from the terms of reference of the department or agency they are considering, I think we have thereby also given the House the right to be informed about what is going on in committee. We all know that this Government and the U.S. Administration differ in their interpretation of the Agreement tabled on October 5 by the Prime Minister. Basically, we know there is no agreement on the interpretation of this document as read by the Government and as read by the U.S. Administration. Today, we are told that a committee of this House, which is an extension of the House and which has certain powers, of course, under Standing Order 96(2), namely to study, has decided to circumvent the democratic process, and that is the subject of my question of privilege: circumventing the democratic process of debate on a subject as important as a free trade agreement between Canada and the United States. I say circumvent, Mr. Speaker, because witnesses who will want to appear before the committee to express their view points will not have time to prepare themselves or draft briefs because the document is not available.

The Government does not want to give us the document. The Prime Minister promised on October 5, and I quote verbatim at page 9632:

Mr. Speaker, I shall table the complete text of the Agreement as soon as the wording is finalized. It will then be referred to the appropriate committee of the House for analysis, study and debate.

I just heard the Minister of State (Treasury Board) (Mr. Lewis) inform the House that as soon as the Agreement is concluded and finalized in legal terms, we will have an opportunity to debate the whole question in committee.

I take it for granted that what the Government has just given us is a firm promise that the committee will resume the study it will be undertaking within a few days, of the preliminary report, or at least of the preliminary agreement tabled in this House on October 5.

Mr. Speaker, I submit that what this House wanted to achieve by extending the terms of reference of the committees was to give more power to Members of Parliament and to the Canadian people. I also submit that it is absolutely essential in a democracy to have the opportunity to express one's views.

When I look at the agenda of the committee, and I can read it to the House, I see that the committee will meet during the week of November 2 for public hearings, and on November 16, November 23 and November 30.

Mr. Speaker, if we accept the explanations of the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) and what has been reported by the media, the final and legal text of the agreement will be available only in late November at the earliest, and perhaps even in December, which would give the Canadian people and the Members of this House at best, and I emphasize "at best", one week to examine the final agreement and tell the Government what we think about it. I do not think that this House can accept such a thing. I find it unacceptable, Mr. Speaker, and a serious restriction of the ability of Members of Parliament to debate this issue, of Canadians to express their views and of the whole country to influence the actions of this Government.

[English]

Mr. Speaker: The Hon. Member for Glengarry—Prescott—Russell (Mr. Boudria) is rising on a point of order. Is it on the same issue?

Mr. Boudria: Yes.

Mr. Speaker: I will hear the Hon. Member in a moment.

[Translation]

But first, it would probably be a good thing for the Chair to express its views about the intervention of the Hon. Member for Ottawa—Vanier (Mr. Gauthier) because this is clearly the same question of privilege. Unfortunately, the arrangements made by the members of the committee may not be satisfactory for some Hon. Members. It also seems that it is necessary to have the final text of the document. However, the Chair does not consider that this constitutes grounds for a question of privilege.