

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, November 26, 1951

The house met at 2.30 p.m.

NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY

CANADA'S CONTRIBUTION TO EUROPEAN DEFENCE
—REFERENCE TO STATEMENT OF
MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Right Hon. L. S. St. Laurent (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, with your permission I must refer once again to the matter of privilege raised by the hon. leader of the opposition (Mr. Drew) on Wednesday last with respect to the report of a statement attributed in press dispatches to the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Claxton) at Rotterdam. Today the *Montreal Gazette* publishes on its first page the following explanation:

No cost figure set by Claxton. \$100 million for Europe 'dromes based on estimates.

Toronto, November 25, C.P.: The \$100 million attributed to Defence Minister Claxton in a Canadian Press story from Rotterdam November 21, as the cost of airfields in western Europe, was an estimate made by Douglas How, C.P. staff correspondent. It was based, How says, on statements by Mr. Claxton in the past that a modern airfield cost \$20 million or more. No specific figure was mentioned by Mr. Claxton at Rotterdam. How's original cable from Rotterdam read:

"Claxton announced Canada foot bill for four or five new airdromes—likely to cost in vicinity of \$100 million—in western Europe to field eleven squadron jet air division which capable providing tactical support for full-fledged army."

Then there are parentheses, and it reads:

(It then went into Mr. Claxton's references to Canada sending arms for more European divisions, and other matters.)

As extended and backgrounded by the Canadian Press cable desk for publication the dispatch ascribed the figures between dashes to the minister as follows:

"Rotterdam, The Netherlands, November 21, C.P.—Brooke Claxton announced today that Canada will foot the bill for four or five new airdromes in western Europe to field an eleven squadron jet air division capable of providing tactical support for a full-fledged army . . .

There are three or four points of suspension, then it goes on:

"The airdromes, he said, will cost in the vicinity of \$100 million."

When this story, among others, became a focal point of controversy in the House of Commons, How was messaged by his head office for confirmation of the announcement that Canada would foot the bill for the airdromes, and for clarification as to whether the estimate of cost was his own or the minister's.

He replied that according to his recollection the defence minister, in answer to a direct question, left no doubt that in the long run in one way or another, Canada would pay for the airfields in ques-

tion. But that the \$100 million figure was his own estimate, based on previous statements by the minister as to the cost of airfields.

Perhaps the lesson from this might be that at times statements, even by ministers of the crown as to what they have said or have not said, might be regarded as apt to be as reliable as the expanded or backgrounded reports published by news agencies.

In that connection the same issue of the *Montreal Gazette* has as its lead editorial one entitled, "Parliament's servant, even in Holland". The first paragraph reads:

The Claxton incident ought not to be exaggerated. Everybody makes mistakes—sometimes bad ones. But the whole matter could have been much better settled if the errors were admitted, with a reasonable expression of regret.

Well, I suppose we can take it that the *Gazette's* error is sufficiently admitted by the publication in the same issue of the article which I have just read. As to whether or not the writer of that article will see fit to make any expression of regret is a matter for himself to decide.

Mr. George A. Drew (Leader of the Opposition): We are, Mr. Speaker, dealing with the reports of very reliable press agencies, and I would point out that the Prime Minister (Mr. St. Laurent) has completely failed to deal with the fundamental issue raised both by the editorial in the *Gazette* to which he has referred and the report which has been issued by the Canadian Press after checking with their reporter, Mr. How. The fact is, in so far as the question of policy is concerned, it does not make any difference whether the amount involved is \$1 million, \$100 million, or \$500 million. From a careful reading of the Canadian Press dispatch to which the Prime Minister has referred, it is quite clear that the report stands except for the figure. This is a financial detail, and a very important one, but the question of policy is whether or not a decision that Canada is to foot the bill for airfields—and may I add for barracks which were not mentioned by the Prime Minister—is to be presented to this house for consideration, or whether the hon. members of this house and the people of Canada are to learn about it for the first time through a statement made in Rotterdam or anywhere else outside of Canada.

When this statement was brought to the attention of the Prime Minister last Wednesday, he did not leave any doubt about his