

Supply

Mr. Forrestall: You do not sound like it.

Mr. Benjamin: I will come to that if the Hon. Member will just wait. If she violated any company policy, then she is subject to reprimand or any other disciplinary action within reason. There is no argument about that. We are saying in our motion that Air Canada acted excessively. Whether or not the grievance is upheld, the fact of awarding a 30-day suspension violates her rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That is what we suggest in the motion.

I first raised this matter in the House a week ago yesterday. I might say that over the weekend prior to that, the Thursday, Friday and Saturday, this particular flight attendant telephoned the Department of Justice, the Prime Minister's Office, the Leader of the Opposition's Office, as well as my Leader's office. In fact, Mr. Hamilton of the Prime Minister's Office returned her call from Montreal on Saturday, and at approximately nine o'clock on Saturday night a Vice-President of Air Canada returned her call. She took those steps on her own initiative.

My Leader passed this matter on to me as transport critic. I asked questions on three successive days of the Minister in order to ascertain information and facts. My questions contained no allegations, aspersions or anything else. I invariably began my questions with: "Is it true?" or "Can the Minister—?" I believe one day the Parliamentary Secretary provided us with some information, which was what I was seeking.

● (1700)

On the handling of the matter itself, I think the Minister acted normally and properly. We all receive letters of complaint and if we cannot get the answer ourselves, we write to the appropriate Minister or Department asking to be provided with information in order to reply. That is perfectly normal. That is all the Minister did. The correspondence unit in his office passed it on to the executive correspondence unit in the Department. That was perfectly proper and normal. The executive correspondence unit of the Department passed it on to Air Canada. All the Department requested was: "Please provide us with sufficient information to prepare a reply. Send this information to the address below, quoting our file number". All the Department asked for was sufficient information in order to prepare a reply for the Minister to send to the complainant. Everything was perfectly proper and normal. The Minister and his own staff and the departmental staff acted perfectly properly.

However, from that point on it was Air Canada's management who hit the panic button. As I said last week, Air Canada proceeded to hunt mosquitoes with elephant guns. All it needed to do was to tell the Minister and his Department to please assure the complainant that it was looking into the matter and would advise. That is all that would have been necessary. But, no, Air Canada immediately tells the girl that she is on a seven day suspension with pay pending a disciplinary hearing. At no time did the Minister or his Department,

as far as I know, and I believe the Minister, interfere directly or indirectly. My colleague, the Hon. Member for Hamilton Mountain (Mr. Deans), and I never inferred that in any way, shape or form. But when the Minister became aware of the kind of action taken by Air Canada, which would have been on Monday, Tuesday or even Wednesday of last week, it seems to me, someone should have said "Hold it". I appreciate that we all have trouble keeping up with our mail, and it must be even more difficult for a cabinet Minister. He cannot possibly keep track of every piece of mail which comes into his office. However, he or someone with some smarts in his office or in the Department should have been on the telephone to Air Canada last week saying: "Hold it. All we asked you for was sufficient information to prepare a reply". It is at that point that I believe the Minister could have and should have quite properly told Air Canada management that that kind of over-reaction was totally unjustified.

I do not know what the politics of this flight attendant are. I did not ask and she did not say. I had two telephone conversations and met with her briefly when she was in Ottawa the other day. But I do know one thing. She is entering her fourteenth year as a flight attendant. She is what is classed as a senior flight attendant. She works mostly on overseas flights and no amateurs work on those flights, as a rule. I have had conversations since this matter became public with people who know her and work with her, even some who have supervised her, and they are all complimentary about her capacity, capability and experience. Her record bears that out. She has some reprimands on her record, but when the day ever comes that any one of us can find a perfect employee, manager, Minister or Member of Parliament, I do not think there will be anyone left on the face of the globe. She has a reprimand on her record for not wearing lipstick and another one for wearing blue panty hose. Had that been a male attendant, Mr. Speaker, that record would be clear.

She became more and more active in union affairs and vocal to the extent of being critical of the Minister because she did not agree with the Government allowing five-day trainees to act as scab flight attendants during the strike. We all knew last summer that a lot of bitterness and anger would hang on for months and months. This particular flight attendant is not any different from hundreds of others. She expressed an opinion. Goodness knows that opinion was expressed by lots of people, including other people who work for Air Canada.

As our motion says, we believe that the 30-day suspension is a violation of her right to speak and state her view, particularly when she is asked for it. There is one case I was informed about a flight attendant caught stealing who received a three-day suspension. The unevenness of the penalty fitting the crime is astonishing. But it is not the details of the case itself. That, of course, will go through the grievance procedure and it is perfectly logical that neither the company nor the union will comment while that procedure is going on. That is perfectly proper. The point is, as our motion says, that we feel that Air Canada violated her right of freedom of speech. She violated