

POINTS OF ORDER

MR. MCGRATH—PROCEEDINGS IN STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, WELFARE AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Mr. Speaker, I wish to raise a point of order arising out of the deliberations this morning of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs. The committee met this morning at 9.30 a.m. to pursue the examination of the estimates of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. As has been the unfortunate custom of committees of the House, especially in dealing with the estimates, there was not a quorum present and consequently the matter could not be raised in committee in the form of either a point of order or an appeal against the ruling of the chairman. In any event, notwithstanding that fact, I believe the matter is substantive and important enough to be brought to your attention and to be raised on the floor of the House.

One of the reasons that, under our new rules, the estimates are referred to committees is in order to give members of the House a better opportunity to examine more closely the spending estimates of agencies other than those for which a department is directly responsible. Consequently, we are able to examine the estimates of various Crown corporations, unfortunately not all Crown corporations but certainly the current estimates, for example, of the CBC, notwithstanding the fact that they come under the blanket of the estimates of the Department of the Secretary of State. Indeed, if we were to raise questions in the House on matters relating to the CBC, we would be told by the minister responsible, the Secretary of State in this case, that he was not answerable for the day to day operations of the CBC, and he would take the matter up with the Crown corporation. That is an acceptable practice. But when it comes to committees, quite obviously and for practical purposes the practice is quite different, especially in regard to the examination of estimates. You can examine the standing committees of the House and you will find, for example, that under the estimates of the Department of Transport we are able to examine the spending estimates of the Canadian National Railways and question officials of CNR. The same applies to the CBC when the estimates of the Secretary of State are before the committee.

This morning I attempted to direct questions to the president of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation arising out of Vote 10, which was properly before the committee, that is, the vote dealing with the operating expenditures of CMHC. The president of the corporation was present. In fact he was introduced by the chairman of the committee as one of the minister's officials present in connection with the main estimates of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs.

At that point I was informed by the chairman of the committee, the hon. member for Ottawa-Vanier (Mr. Gauthier), that I could not direct questions to the president of CMHC, that only the minister was answerable for CMHC. I submit to you, sir, that that is a major departure from the practices of the House. Ministers are not answerable for the day to day operations of Crown corporations. When we are in committee we are entitled, indeed we have an obligation, to

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examine the spending estimates on a day to day basis of Crown corporations that come under the umbrella of the various ministers who answer for them in the House.

I submit to you, Mr. Speaker, that I was unable to appeal the chairman's ruling because there was not a quorum present, as I have indicated, and I was not able to raise a point of order, again for lack of a quorum.

Given the fact that we are operating under the very limited constraints of the standing orders and the block system by which committees are able to examine estimates, we have very limited time, even if this parliament is to continue beyond the end of the time frame given in the standing orders by which estimates are deemed to have been reported back to the House, and I think the guillotine date is the end of May. So I have no choice but to bring this matter to your attention.

This has been raised in the House before on a number of occasions and Your Honour has said that you are not responsible for the day to day operations of committees and that you are not accountable for the rulings of committee chairmen. Under the circumstances of the various questions that have been raised, this was a ruling that was readily acceptable to the House. But I submit to you that we have a different situation here. We have the situation whereby a Crown corporation which comes under the umbrella of the estimates of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs comes before the committee. We are told at the outset by the chairman of the committee that one of the votes that we have before us is Vote 10 dealing with the operating expenses of CMHC, and yet we are told we cannot direct questions to the president of CMHC who is sitting at the table. How then are we to examine the estimates of CMHC?

Obviously the minister cannot be accountable for the day to day operations of a Crown corporation, and rightly so because Crown corporations are autonomous organizations established under their own statutes and answerable to the House for their spending estimates through the various committees of the House.

I understand why the hon. member for Ottawa-Vanier, the chairman of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, did not wish to permit me to direct my line of questioning to the president of CMHC because it had to do with a rather scandalous practice that has arisen whereby this very important Crown corporation is being used by the government, and specifically by the Minister of State for Urban Affairs (Mr. Ouellet), for partisan political purposes.

The matter has been raised in the House whereby we questioned the right of Liberal members of parliament to present cheques on behalf of CMHC to various municipalities across the country. That practice has been raised in the House and has been called into question. Indeed we know, by virtue of a Canadian Press story in the form of a memorandum from the president of CMHC to the Minister of State for Urban Affairs, that the corporation itself has very strong reservations about this practice because of the danger of the corporation being used in a partisan way under the operations of the government.