

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Transport): No, Madam Speaker. Generally speaking, I think Via Rail, the Canadian Transport Commission and the Department of Transport are courageously trying at the present time to offer a better rail transport system for passengers. And this obviously requires adjustments. My hon. friend says a train has been suppressed from Ottawa to Montreal. I regret passengers being inconvenienced by this fact, but one must realize that the ticket from Ottawa to Montreal costs the Department of Transport twice as much as the price charged to the passenger himself. I say this simply to demonstrate that a rationalization must be effected, that this will create in certain regions difficulties they have to cope with and which we have to deal with ourselves.

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[English]

PRIVILEGE

MR. BROADBENT—PUBLICLY FINANCED POLLS

Mr. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa): Madam Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege which I brought to your attention yesterday on the important subject of polling, something which has been indulged in by this government and by a number of other governments for a considerable period of time. The issue is not whether polling of itself is justified but whether the government, having conducted the polls, has made the proper use of the information it has obtained and, related to that but not essential to the argument, the public's interest is also involved in the limits to spending on the question of polling itself. But that is a subsidiary point that I want to make.

I do not usually quote *The Globe and Mail* as it is not well known as supportive of social democracy in Canada, but every now and then even *The Globe and Mail* has something to say that is right. In today's paper the case is well made in one sentence about the issue which is at stake on the question of this government's use of polls. In an editorial it says:

In a democracy the floor is supposed to be equally open to all debaters.

I do not agree with much more than that in *The Globe and Mail*, but with that sentence I am in fundamental agreement. Since last spring this government has been pursued on the question of polls by members of my party. We raised questions in April and subsequent to that. In July I wrote the Prime Minister, (Mr. Trudeau) asking for clarification of the government's position and an outline of the policy the government would pursue. No adequate answer was received. In fact the answer which I received from the Prime Minister, and which in essence was argued in a related question of privilege yesterday in the House, is that the current government, a partisan government—as all governments are by definition—will judge itself whether polling information is to be made available to all members of the House of Commons and therefore, indirectly, to the people of Canada. For my party this principle is completely unacceptable.

If the people of Canada are going to be financing polling, in a democracy, then all the people, through the House of

Privilege—Mr. Broadbent

Commons, have a right to have access to the information provided to the government in those polls.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Broadbent: The issue then is not one of legitimacy of the government conducting the polls or not. That is a spurious debating point raised by the Prime Minister who specializes in that kind of activity. The government is entirely right to do some polling if, for example, it has a program in the health field and needs to find out something about its efficacy. It is entirely legitimate from time to time to conduct a survey to find out if the people of Canada are getting a service which ought to be provided by legislation approved by Parliament. There is no doubt that the people in my party accept the necessity of polling, it is a legitimate, important access to relevant information in a modern age. But the question that goes to the root of democratic responsibility is: should such information be kept in the exclusive hands of the government of the day? That is the question which has to be answered.

Our view on this side is very clear. It is fundamentally wrong for the government of the day to obtain information on the one hand but then judge on its own whether or not such information should be made available. That is incontestably a partisan decision.

Certain information can be used to the political advantage of the government. It would be very good to reveal some information, and the government has indicated it would be more than willing from time to time to give the members of the House of Commons and the people of Canada such information, when it is to its advantage. Conversely, look at the information that would come in which would show that programs are not working and are shoddy. It would not be advantageous to the government for members on this side of the House to know that, in a partisan sense, but it would be in the public's interest to know.

We have seen unfortunate experiences in other jurisdictions where polling has been very clearly demonstrated to have been done in one week or one month, kept secret from opposition parties, then used as a method for establishing government policy in subsequent weeks or months. Such a situation raises the spectre of the use of public funds by a political party for its political campaigning, and this has no legitimate basis in a democratic government.

● (1210)

Therefore, I would like to come quickly to the appropriate use of polling and make very specific suggestions which I think would obviate a question of privilege, if the government agreed to them. They are suggestions which should be followed in a democracy. Because they have not been followed, the equal right of all members to have access to all information important to a debate, financed by the people of Canada, is being denied us.

We would suggest the following: that each minister be responsible for ensuring that all contracts for public opinion polling by the minister or agent of the minister be listed after