

Ministerial Responsibility

I asked in this House that the public servant at least be given the right to come before a committee of parliament and give his side of the question. Another former public servant, the President of the Treasury Board, said "no" and cast him on the tender mercies of a grievance procedure which would take the public servant to the very person who ordered his removal; or, in the alternative, he put the public servant to the tender mercies of the courts. All of us who have practised in the courts know the delays incurred. All of us who have served in this parliament know how fruitless and futile that remedy is. Mr. Speaker, we have \$16 million down the drain; that is for sure. We have no aircraft for the military; we know that. Out of it all, instead of taking his responsibilities seriously, the minister points his finger at a public servant. I think in this long session of parliament, not having been here very long, that particular action—I see the Minister for Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald) is involved, and I hope he would not do that to his public servants.

The Minister of Supply and Services has really carried this matter of ministerial responsibility to a new low. It is an interesting matter to the public service of Canada. They are much the same as any other group of Canadians in wanting to do a particular job and to do it well. If a minister is prepared to encourage his public servants, protect them when necessary, take responsibility when necessary, then the public service of this country is prepared to put out for the minister and for the government.

The things I have heard on the street, the things that are relayed to me by letter and telephone, show me that public servants are shocked by what has happened. The public service of this country will not tolerate incompetence. I do not think a government ought to tolerate incompetence, but I do not think it is fair for a government to make an accusation of incompetence and shift the blame for its own irresponsible acts to a person who has no opportunity to defend himself. That is what happened in this case.

Let me ask, Mr. Speaker, if you would enter into any transaction that would cost you the amount of money that this transaction has cost the people of Canada, without putting it in writing? You would not buy a rowboat under those circumstances, Mr. Speaker. Yet this government embarked upon a defence policy with a company whose record is at least questionable in the eyes of the rest of the world, without even a jot in writing with respect to one of the important aspects thereof.

That same minister, and indeed the ministry—because the Prime Minister was drawn into this, and the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp)—does not have the guts to stand up and take its responsibilities and its lumps with respect to this transaction.

● (1610)

I do not want you to think, Mr. Speaker, that the doctrine of ministerial responsibility is not important. James Eayrs, professor of international relations at the University of Toronto, in a newspaper column entitled "Minister must take blame for Lockheed" said in part:

At stake is the charge by Jean-Pierre Goyer, Minister of Supply and Services, that L. H. Stopworth, Goyer's representative on the inter-departmental committee supervising the acquisition of 18 Orion patrol planes from the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, failed to keep him properly informed.

[Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton).]

At stake is more than the careers of the two men concerned, more than the \$16 million that we, the taxpayers, must cough up in cancellation charges now that the deal has fallen through.

At stake is a cornerstone of our structure of parliamentary democracy—the way we run our country. At stake is the constitutional principle known as "ministerial responsibility."

The doctrine of ministerial responsibility prescribes that a member of the cabinet is answerable to parliament for what goes on in his department. It is not for him to point the finger. It is not for him to pass the buck. If he speaks at all about the public servants in his charge, it should be to protect and defend them—never to accuse and attack them.

Ministerial responsibility's most attractive feature is its sense of fair play. After all, it's the minister who is quick to claim the credit and grab the glory when his department does well by him. Why shouldn't the manfully shoulder the blame when there are goofs? Since he gets the praise, he should take the rap. This is what ministerial responsibility requires him to do.

Next I shall read something written by Professor McGregor Dawson. In his book he mentions changes which have occurred in the public service, but he makes the point that the minister takes the responsibility and should not place blame elsewhere. Speaking of what has happened in the public service, he said in his book:

None of these changes, all of which helped produce a massive reorganization of the executive and the public service of Canada, altered the fundamental fact that executive and public service in Canada have always in one respect discharged a common function, the enforcement, application, and development of the national policies. But the distinction between the two is never in any doubt: the executive is a political body; the public service is non-political, and consists of the growing number of employees of the state who work in either a department of government, or a Crown corporation or other agency engaged in administering some particular law or laws.

There are those who say times have changed, that governments have grown more complex. That is true. To an ever greater extent governments, at their own instance or the instance of others, have intruded into our affairs and grown more complex. Nevertheless, at the very foundation of our system is the doctrine that the minister is ultimately responsible, that he must stand up publicly and be answerable. That duty remains, and does not in any way limit the right of the public servant to expect that the minister will be answerable for the affairs of the department. That has not changed, and it is time this House confirmed and reaffirmed its views on ministerial responsibility. That is why the House is debating this motion today. Writing in "Parliamentary Affairs," volume 26, No. 4, published in the autumn of 1973, David Butler said, at page 403:

Consider first individual ministerial responsibility. Its central doctrine is that for every public act of a public servant, a minister has to answer to parliament. It is an assertion of democratic accountability. Honouring the ancestral cry "grievances precede supply," some member of the government has to reply for any action—or want of action—in which public money, gathered from the taxpayer, is or might be involved.

Individual ministerial responsibility is easy to ridicule. How can a minister take responsibility for the innumerable acts of his civil servants, many of them involving technicians of which he could not conceivably master? In ordinary affairs we are seldom willing to carry the can for things about which we have no knowledge and no possibility of control. We can hardly feel surprised when we see ministers passing the buck: "It was before my time," "I had to rely on the expert advice I was given," "I could not have known anything about it."

The House has received replies of that kind. I continue:

But to answer does not mean to take the blame in a personal way; still less does it mean to resign. To answer only requires a minister to say "I have ministerial responsibility for this. I am sorry that a mistake has been made. I have taken steps to see that it does not happen again."