

Oral Questions

The problem that we have is that this statement was not made in the House of Commons. We have proof today from the conflicting answers that I received from the Prime Minister and from the Minister of Transport that we do not know whether or not the document given out at 11 o'clock is accurate because the Prime Minister says the Halifax maintenance centre will be kept open, and now we have—

Mr. Siddon: So did the Minister.

Mr. Murphy: Yes, and then the Minister of Transport got up and said exactly the same thing. The problem is that the document issued this morning says the Halifax maintenance centre will be closed. It does not say open part way. It does not say open for one or two people. The government should have made the point in the House, given us the documents in the House, and stood by the documents that it has given to the people of Canada.

Mr. Ron MacDonald (Dartmouth): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Transport said very clearly today that the Halifax maintenance centre is going to be maintained. Now during the press conference after the announcement at 11.30 today, the President of CN and of VIA, Mr. Lawless, stated quite clearly in response to a question from a reporter that 190 jobs would be lost in the Halifax area due to the shutting down of the Halifax maintenance centre.

I think this government better get its act together and tell Canadians, the travelling public, and the people employed by VIA Rail what the truth is. Is that centre going to be closed down? Are those jobs going to be lost? Who is misleading whom in this case?

• (1510)

Mr. Peter Milliken (Kingston and the Islands): Mr. Speaker, the answer that was given by the Minister of Justice to the point of order raised by the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Atikokan—

Mr. Lewis: It wasn't a point of order.

Mr. Milliken: It was a perfectly good point of order. The answer that was given was quite unsatisfactory. The Minister of Justice says that this government has made more ministerial statements in this House than any other. The ministerial statements have not dealt with the major issues of government policy, they have dealt with announcements of family week or international fairness

week, or whatever they have been. They have been motherhood announcements on minor matters compared with this kind of item that is slashing the livelihood of thousands of Canadians.

Mr. Speaker: The point of order is specifically this, whether it is appropriate for the government under the circumstances to have made an announcement by press conference other than by ministers' statements. That is the sole issue.

The hon. member for Kingston and The Islands might conclude on that point.

Mr. Milliken: Mr. Speaker, I was getting to that. I was trying to answer the comments that were coming from across the way. The fact is that there has been a practice in this House for years for ministers to come into this House and make major policy statements. It was a practice, I may say, Mr. Speaker, that was followed very, very carefully by the previous Liberal administration up until 1984.

We are faced now with a situation where the government has made a major policy announcement while the House was sitting. This House was sitting this week and the minister could easily have delayed this statement until Statements by Ministers in the next few minutes this afternoon. The minister could have made his announcement yesterday afternoon. We are told that the minister had to do it in a great frantic rush this morning at a press conference that was called only this morning. I say that it is a contempt of this House for the minister to avoid making his statement here.

Parliament sits to hear the policies of the Government of Canada and to comment on them. It is our job as members of Parliament to make comments on those policies as they are announced. Those announcements should not come out by way of press conference. We are not expected to respond by way of press conference and yet that is exactly the expectation raised by this abuse of the precedent and practice of this House.

I could quote extensively from previous members of the Conservative party. Mr. Diefenbaker used to chastise the Liberal Government constantly for making very minor announcements outside this House. Liberal governments made minor announcements outside but the major ones were all done in here. This was a major announcement that should have been done here.