

Attendance of Ministers in House

I might point out also in respect of the rescheduling that on Fridays the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Sharp) and the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Cadieux) are absent, and this at a time when we have set up a committee involving both these departments. In respect of departments which relate closely one to another I might say that also on Fridays the Solicitor General (Mr. McIlraith) and the Minister of Justice (Mr. Turner) are absent.

Mr. Speaker, I move this motion in order to bring about a more consistent approach by the government to its responsibility to the house, as has been the practice of past governments throughout the years.

I, therefore, move seconded by the hon. member for Parry Sound-Muskoka (Mr. Aiken):

That the matter of scheduling of ministers in the house and the general conditions affecting the daily question period be referred to the special committee on procedure.

Mr. Speaker: Before the Chair can even consider putting the motion before the house there are a number of conditions which must be fulfilled. One is that the Chair must be satisfied that in the matter brought up by the hon. member for Cape Breton-East Richmond (Mr. MacInnis) there is a prima facie question of privilege. Perhaps hon. members might like to enlighten the Chair on this particular point.

Mr. G. H. Aiken (Parry Sound-Muskoka): Mr. Speaker, the subject matter raised by the hon. member received a good deal of attention on Friday during consideration of the estimates of the Privy Council. I do not believe we need repeat the arguments today.

However, two situations have arisen which affect the whole question. First, we no longer appear to have acting ministers in the house to replace those who are absent. On several occasions when a question was asked of the Prime Minister he consulted his roster and requested that the question be asked when the minister was present. This would indicate that no acting minister had been designated on that occasion. Likewise it has always been the practice, or at least the understanding, that when a minister is absent from Ottawa there would be an acting minister to take over his duties. The question the hon. member has raised is whether the absence of a minister from the chamber when he is actually within the precincts of the building is sufficient to necessitate having an acting minister in the chamber during the question period.

[Mr. MacInnis (Cape Breton-East Richmond).]

There is also a question in respect of amending the duty roster which provides for a programmed absence by ministers who might logically be acting for others who are absent. For example, on Mondays the roster which has been distributed to us indicates that the ministers of finance, national revenue, industry and trade and commerce and the President of the Treasury Board will all be absent. Any one of those might logically be the acting minister prepared to accept questions in the general area of their responsibility. Likewise on Fridays the Minister of Justice and the Solicitor General will be absent. Again the person who might logically be the acting minister will also be absent.

This whole question of acting ministers and their presence in the house is one that deserves scrutiny by the committee on procedure, in that there is a new situation which affects the rights of all members to direct questions to the members of the ministry. While this is not really part of the program, we have a special committee on procedure with the task at the moment of reviewing various reforms in our procedures. I believe we must take a much different approach to this whole matter of the question period. These are matters which are of concern to that committee. I think the motion which has been made is logical and fair under the circumstances.

Right Hon. P.-E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, the only question which I believe you are asked to deal with now is whether there is a matter of privilege involved. I think the simplest answer is that this whole matter is not dealt with specifically in the standing rules; hon. members are not deprived of any privilege in view of the fact that we have not altered any standing order which affects their privileges or rights.

Let me repeat once more that we are merely trying an experiment to find a solution to a situation which exists in fact. Ministers are bound to be away during a parliamentary session on matters pertaining to the administration and in discharge of their duties throughout the country. The purpose of this innovation is to ensure that there will always be ministers, acting ministers or parliamentary secretaries in the house on specific days who are able to answer in respect of subject matters falling within the jurisdiction and administration of those departments.

If while dealing with the substance of the matter, sir, you want to cut me short I will accept your suggestion, but perhaps I might