

Privilege—Mr. Lawrence

subject to which the House might wish to address itself. In debating the motion put forward by the hon. member, members of the House might make valuable contributions to the question of whether or not we should treat this kind of electronic interference in some special way. Indeed, if the House decides in its wisdom that the matter should be referred to a committee for consideration, the committee hearing might result in an indication of the proper attitude which should be taken toward the matter. Therefore, on balance, in the special circumstances which exist here, it is my conclusion that I should resolve my doubt in favour of putting the question to the House at the proper time.

There are other matters to be dealt with this afternoon. There are other procedural matters to be dealt with and further items under Routine Proceedings to be considered before Orders of the Day are called. Perhaps I could let the matter stand over and put the question to the House prior to calling Orders of the Day, until which time hon. members would have the opportunity of reflecting upon what their attitude would be toward the motion.

MR. LAWRENCE—ANSWERS GIVEN BY SOLICITOR GENERAL

Mr. Speaker: The second question of privilege which is outstanding relates to a matter which dates back to February 3, 1978, a question of privilege respecting answers to questions asked during the oral question period. This relates to a series of events beginning when the Solicitor General (Mr. Blais) indicated in answer to a question that he did not intend to comment day by day on evidence adduced before the McDonald commission.

This response gave rise to a question of privilege, during the discussion of which I expressed the view that the matter, at that point, was hypothetical and that it should be tested by putting further questions to the minister during that or subsequent question periods. At that time both the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark) and the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) made motions to refer the issue to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

At the conclusion of the discussion I expressed the view that, in the final analysis, the House was forced back upon the position that in our practice a minister is not obliged to answer a question and therefore it was futile for the Chair even to attempt to determine the validity of the grounds upon which a minister in any individual case might refuse to make an answer. I also stated it might be useful to reserve judgment on the two motions for an extended period in order to determine exactly what would take place during the question periods which followed.

● (1512)

On March 9 a number of questions were addressed to the Solicitor General dealing generally with administrative procedures involved in the handling of certain secret documents and procedures for the issuing of warrants under the Official Secrets Act. The Solicitor General indicated in reply that he

[Mr. Speaker.]

did not intend to comment on those matters, and consequently the hon. member for Perth-Wilmot (Mr. Jarvis) raised a question of privilege and asked that the earlier motions to which I have referred, those of the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre which had been offered earlier, be revived. At that stage I took the matter under further consideration, and I must say that again I can see no way in which the Chair can intervene, since the Chair cannot be called upon to make a value judgment respecting answers given to questions and, of course, cannot under any circumstances compel a minister to make an answer during any question period.

I think also it is understood that the House ought not to seek redress from the Chair in a situation of this kind because to find otherwise, it seems to me, would be to make a shift of ministerial responsibility onto the shoulders of the Chair, which I think all hon. members would consider to be a regrettable development.

In other words, we return to the basic point that since there can be no obligation upon a minister to make an answer, and since such an obligation, if it did exist or if it were capable of definition, would seem to be incapable of enforcement in any given circumstances, in the final analysis on both these motions we are reduced to that basic point, and I must set them aside.

MR. NIELSEN—POSTAL SERVICE

Mr. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, I have a very brief question of privilege with respect to how unauthorized material finds its way into the hands of members of parliament. It can be explained simply by my reading a memorandum from my constituency office secretary addressed to myself and dated March 13, 1978, which reads as follows:

You will find enclosed herewith a House of Commons requisition dated January 17/78 for envelopes which were sent to this office and received on March 7th last, in a blue postal bag addressed to you.

Today, during my lunch hour, I untied the bag and emptied some of the two parcels. The parcels tumbled out onto the floor along with the enclosed packet of letters which was bound by the rubber band and the yellow square of paper bearing the following postal stamp which reads "COURTRIGHT PM 19 VIII 77 ONT".

Presumably the date was October 19, 1977.

The packet contains 6 letters properly addressed, stamped, postmarked and self-addressed.

I am sending them to you for your attention by registered mail this afternoon—

I received them yesterday.

—as I feel very strongly that someone in parliament should be made aware of the neglect that residents of Canada receive at the hands of our present postal service. "Service" is not the correct term for this type of error in directing mail. You will note that the 6 letters were sent to Montreal, P.Q., and here I am with them in hand in Whitehorse, Yukon.

I am certain the senders have been greatly inconvenienced—an understatement, to say the least.

They were received unopened, and they are being returned unopened across the aisle today. I hope that they are not secret material.