

*Adjournment Debate*

In my question I referred to a little booklet of some six pages, which is entitled *Notes on the Responsibilities of Public Servants in Relation to Parliamentary Committees*. It is put out by the Privy Council Office. It was put out in this case in December 1990.

For those who are not familiar with the Privy Council Office, of course it is the highest office for public servants in this land and provides guidance to those public servants on how they should behave.

In my question I quoted a couple of paragraphs of this little booklet. In responding, the Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, proceeded to lecture me on the McGrath committee of 1985 and what occurred in the McGrath committee. Of course, that is totally irrelevant because that took place many years before the publication of this document. This document is recent. It is less than one year old and it was given the blessing of the Privy Council Office. It says very clearly the following, and I quote from page one:

Ours is a system of "responsible" government because the Government must retain the confidence of the House of Commons and because Ministers are responsible to the House for everything that is done under their authority. They are answerable to Parliament and its committees. It is Ministers who decide policy and Ministers who must defend it before the House and ultimately before the people of Canada.

That is on page one of this very short booklet. On the last page of this very short booklet, page six, there is a recap. Remember that this is a booklet that public servants are expect to read and are expected to follow in their conduct when they appear before committees.

It is reiterated in the final paragraph and I quote:

It is Ministers, and not officials, who exercise the constitutional authority of the Crown; and it is Ministers, and not their officials, who are responsible to Parliament. Officials are accountable to Ministers.

I asked a very simple question in connection with those two paragraphs. I thought it was clear, non-partisan and simple. Will the Prime Minister confirm that this is the policy of his government? Surely a yes or no answer would have sufficed.

A document produced by the highest civil servant to be followed by the rest of the civil servants, I ask very simply: Is this the policy of this government. I am asking again. Could I please have a yes or no?

**Mr. Benno Friesen (Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary of State for External Affairs):** Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to what the member had to say.

I was a member of the McGrath commission as was his colleague, the member for Papineau. One of the clear statements made by that commission was that while ministers of the Crown are responsible, they cannot be exclusively responsible because every department in government is so large that you cannot expect the minister to know everything that is going on in the department.

I want to respond more specifically to what the member has to say to put to rest any concerns he might have concerning the state of health of parliamentary democracy as it exists in Canada today.

In our system of government, the powers of the Crown are exercised by ministers who are in turn answerable to Parliament. The exercise of these powers for which ministers are constitutionally responsible to Parliament provides the foundation of responsible government.

This system of government enables Parliament to focus responsibility for the conduct of government on those of its members who hold ministerial office and who ultimately must personally answer to Parliament and hence to the electorate for their actions and the actions of their subordinates.

Ministers are supported in the exercise of their responsibilities of the Public Service whose duty it is to give loyal, professional and non-partisan support to the government of the day.

Public servants are responsible to ministers. They have no constitutional responsibility to Parliament, nor do they share in that of ministers. They do, however, support ministers in their relationship with Parliament and to this extent they may be said to assist in the answerability of ministers to Parliament.

Ministers fulfil their responsibilities and are called to account by the House of Commons for the exercise of their statutory authority in accordance with practice and convention. This accountability is and has been well noted by eminent authorities and those who have political responsibility.