

## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Friday, March 9, 1990

The House met at 10 a.m.

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*Prayers*

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[*English*]

### PRIVILEGE

#### GOODS AND SERVICES TAX—SPEAKER'S RULING

**Mr. Speaker:** On Tuesday, February 6, 1990, the hon. member for Kamloops raised a question of privilege claiming that the Department of Finance had acted in contempt of the House in its recent publication and distribution of a brochure on the goods and services tax.

In presenting his argument the hon. member recalled the situation that arose last fall when the former Leader of the Opposition raised a question of privilege challenging the right of the finance department to advertise information about the proposed goods and services tax, without due regard to the role of Parliament in approving such a tax. He maintained that this new case was similar because, in his words, "the Department of Finance was employing a communications strategy in advance of a House of Commons decision". Such a campaign, he argued, could only be prejudicial to the work of the committee which, as he put it, is charged with amending the GST bill.

[*Translation*]

For his part, the Government House Leader pointed out that the brochure prepared by the Department of Finance did not assume that the GST proposal had already become law. The minister assured the House that all advertisements and information material prepared by the department since the ruling of October 10 have heeded the Chair's warning about due regard for the role of Parliament.

[*English*]

The October ruling, as hon. members will recall, found the advertisements of late August on the GST to be cavalier and almost bold in tone. In particular, the offending passage declared that "on January 1, 1991 the federal sales tax system will change". Furthermore, readers were requested to save the advertisement, since it served as a notice of the new tax system. The Chair found that these advertisements had been ill-conceived but that they fell short of offending the strict definition of contempt.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member from Kamloops claims that the recently printed brochure offends the dignity of Parliament in a similar fashion and that the action of the Department of Finance amounts to a contempt of the House.

[*English*]

I have had an opportunity to examine the brochure. On page 1, the very first sentence of the text reads: "Legislation to implement the goods and services tax (GST) is currently before Parliament". The text goes on to state that on January 1, 1991 the government proposes to eliminate the existing federal sales tax, FST, and replace it with the GST.

Such language is quite different in tone and substance from the advertisements of last August, and in the opinion of the Chair in no sense vitiates the debate on the GST in this House or in committee.

How the government seeks to promote its policies may well be a matter of concern to hon. members and to the Canadian electorate. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the government has a right to communicate with the public about its policies and programs. Indeed the government has a responsibility to inform Canadians about what it is seeking to do, particularly on issues of great complexity or controversy.