

Security

editorial: "The Prime Minister and his colleagues either don't know or won't admit what cabinet responsibility means."

When revelations about illegal security operations first began to surface it appeared to this side of the House that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and his colleagues simply were not admitting to their responsibility in these matters. That, Mr. Speaker, is bad enough. But after two weeks of questioning by the opposition, during which time the government has attempted to shift the blame on to the RCMP, it is becoming more and more obvious that the government does not know what cabinet responsibility means. Further, it is becoming obvious that it does not know what "illegal" means.

The events and revelations which have been disclosed over the last few weeks should make us all tremble with rage! What have we found? A prime minister who shrugs with indifference at the idea of the police breaking the law, or who glibly suggests that if the law gets in the way then it ought to be changed; a Solicitor General (Mr. Fox) who refuses to accept responsibility for what has gone on in his department and to whom the illegal acts appear, in his own words, mere "unfortunate events"; a Postmaster General (Mr. Blais) who is not even aware that mail is being opened by the RCMP, contrary to the provisions of the Post Office Act.

The news reports of the past few weeks are astounding to ordinary Canadians. Just as disturbing is the fact that the serious events about which we have heard have become almost routine happenings. Even worse than the allegations which are coming forth every day, is the reaction of the government when pressed by the opposition to account for them. Ministers evade questions and avoid giving answers. They try to cloud the issue by suggesting that opposition parties are undermining the integrity of the RCMP. They accuse the opposition of neglecting the greater problems of the economy and of national unity.

What the government is seeking to do by these diversionary tactics is to distract the attention of Canadians from the very real danger which threatens them, a danger which outranks in importance and gravity both the economic issues and the threat to national unity. It is a danger which derives from a government which has placed itself above the rule of law and which, in so doing, has created a real and imminent threat to the political processes which we have taken for granted throughout our history.

● (2202)

Of course it is to the government's advantage to manipulate the views of the public by downgrading the attempts of the opposition to get to the bottom of these serious allegations. However, the attitudes of the Prime Minister and of some of his colleagues notwithstanding, surely there must be some members on the other side of the House who still understand that even more fundamental than any economic or constitutional concern is the maintenance of parliamentary democracy in this country.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[Miss MacDonald.]

Miss MacDonald: Opposition questioning about these serious allegations is an attempt, if ministers opposite will try to understand, to make the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues accept the responsibility for what goes on in their departments. Opposition questioning is an attempt to make the Prime Minister and his cabinet aware, since they so easily forget, that they are accountable to the people of Canada through parliament. It is an attempt to bring home to the people of this country the fact that their freedoms and their civil liberties are being eroded before their eyes by a government which no longer knows the difference between national security and the security of the Liberal party.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Miss MacDonald: What is at issue here is not the actions of the RCMP. The real essence of this issue is the lack of government responsibility and the erosion of civil liberties.

The government, in its answers to questions in this House during the last two weeks, has been vacillating between two positions: that of denying responsibility for any illegal actions that may have taken place, and that of excusing them in the name of national security. Both of these positions are reprehensible; but I want to concentrate on the last one, excusing them in the name of national security.

I am very much bothered by this term national security, which has been bandied about so freely in the past few weeks. What does that phrase mean? Is it a threat to national security to disagree with the Prime Minister and his colleagues? Is it a threat to national security to express that disagreement through legitimate political channels and actions? Who in the government is setting the parameters of national security, and who is defining what constitutes a threat to it?

I have always believed that we in Canada lived in a democratic society. I have always believed that in that democratic society there existed certain inviolable rights: the right to freedom of speech; the right to join any group in order to express that freedom, be it political, social or religious; the right to privacy; the right to a fair trial; and the right to presumption of innocence.

I have always believed that the law applied to everyone, but here in parliament we have been repeatedly told in recent days that the law does not apply to everyone, that some people cannot be presumed innocent, that privacy of individuals can be invaded, that certain organizations can operate less freely than others, and that the freedom of expression of some individuals may be intercepted or monitored, all in the interests of national security.

We in the opposition are being told that we should not make a fuss about this, that we should be reasonable and allow that some people are freer than others, and that occasionally the rule of reason must take precedence over the rule of law. The law is written down and is applied and interpreted within the strict confines of the traditions of precedents and of the judicial system. Reason is rather nebulous and is often inter-