

Point of Order—Mr. Beatty

Minister of Finance, who wants to commit people to a lifetime of debt? When will he take action with the rest of us in the House and do something about bringing down mortgage interest rates?

● (1500)

Hon. Paul J. Cosgrove (Minister of Public Works): Madam Speaker, in response to a question by one of the colleagues of the hon. member this afternoon, the Minister of Finance indicated that some financial institutions have already taken steps to assist Canadians faced with these kinds of problems.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Cosgrove: I have taken steps. I have personally responded to questions, incidents, and examples raised by colleagues of the hon. member. We are looking at individual cases where there is imminent danger of steps being taken which puts them in a position that is irretrievable. We have taken steps, and we are continuing to do so.

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PETITION

TABLING OF REPORTS OF CLERK OF PETITIONS

Madam Speaker: I have the honour to inform the House that the Clerk of the House has laid upon the Table reports of the Clerk of Petitions, stating that he has examined the petitions presented by hon. members on Tuesday, October 27, 1981, and finds that they meet the requirements of the Standing Orders as to form.

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POINT OF ORDER

MR. BEATTY—QUESTIONS ADDRESSED TO COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN DURING QUESTION PERIOD

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Dufferin-Simcoe): Madam Speaker, there was an incident during question period today which led to the point of order I want to raise now. As Madam Speaker is aware, the Chair does not ordinarily entertain points of order during question period. The first opportunity Members of Parliament have to raise points of order arising out of question period comes at three o'clock.

I refer Madam Speaker's attention to Citation 366 of Beauchesne's fifth edition which deals with the entire issue of private members having questions addressed to them during question period. It reads as follows:

Questions may be asked of private members only under strict limitations. Virtually the only question possible would refer to a committee of which the member is the chairman. A question asking, for example, if a member intended to introduce certain legislation, is out of order.

This is the only reference I could find in Beauchesne's respecting the addressing of questions to private members.

Obviously it leaves considerable discretion in the hands of Madam Speaker.

What happened this afternoon during question period is that questions were directed to a committee chairman acting in his capacity as chairman of the Standing Committee on Transport. They were not inquiries of the ministry. This was done on some three separate occasions. The chairman of the committee rose three times from his seat to seek to respond to the question, and at the same time the government House leader rose to try to wrest the floor away from him and to be recognized first.

The implications of a decision that a member of the ministry would have priority in responding to a question relating strictly to the responsibilities of a committee chairman, acting in his capacity as chairman of the committee, are very serious indeed for the functioning of all standing committees of the House of Commons. First of all I point out that committee chairmen are private members. They are not members of the ministry. They are not elected by the ministry. They are elected by the members of the committees themselves. Their responsibilities are owed not to the ministry. They are not accountable to the ministry or the party, but rather to hon. members of the House of Commons, in particular members of the committees.

If the right of an individual committee chairman to respond to questions addressed to him concerning his responsibilities as committee chairman is allowed to be pre-empted by a minister of the Crown seeking the floor at the same time, we are doing serious damage to the independence of committees of Parliament and are putting them in a position where the only way they can report to Parliament during question period is with the consent and agreement of the government.

When Beauchesne provided for questions to be put to private members who are committee chairmen respecting the discharge of their responsibilities and the activities of committees, surely it was not intended that the chairmen should have to funnel their responses to committee members and to parliamentarians through the government House leader.

The reason this is of particular concern to me is that I am Commons chairman of one of the two committees of Parliament which is chaired, by convention, by an opposition chairman. Madam Speaker will be aware of the fact that my colleague, the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra (Mr. Clarke), is chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and that I am chairman of the Standing Joint Committee on Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments. The convention was established over the years that those two chairmanships should reside on the opposition side, precisely to stress the independence of committee chairmen and the independence of the committees themselves from the ministry. The responsibilities of those two committees are to hold the government to account and to hold its activities in check. Their responsibilities are very clearly to members of the committees and to members of the House of Commons, not at all to the ministry.

In this particular instance, when Your Honour recognized the government House leader as opposed to the chairman of