

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, April 19, 1983

The House met at 11 a.m.

● (1105)

[English]

PRIVILEGE

MR. NIELSEN—REPORTED LEAK OF PROPOSED BUDGETARY MEASURES

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, I rise to raise a question of privilege involving a most serious budget leak which occurred yesterday. This being the first opportunity to raise that question, I take the opportunity. After hearing my submissions, no doubt you will want to seek the advice of other Hon. Members on the matter I raise. I would be prepared to move the appropriation motion should you find that there is a prima facie case of privilege.

Budget secrecy is a basic principle of our traditions of parliamentary Government. It means that the Minister responsible for bringing down a budget is also held responsible to see to it that the provisions of that budget are not prematurely released. The reasons for this are many. Foreknowledge of budgetary measures has led to the acquisition of private gain and to sharp market fluctuations. My information is current that those fluctuations are taking place and that the Canadian dollar is indeed now falling on the markets.

It is not a principle that it is necessary to defend; it has been accepted in the parliamentary system ever since budgets existed. A breach of budget secrecy has always and invariably led to the resignation of the Minister. It must also be regarded as a breach of the oath which the Minister takes as a member of the Privy Council.

A well known case in the United Kingdom was that involving the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, who, in a casual conversation with reporters, hinted at a rise in the tax on tobacco. I will be coming back to that precedent. His resignation as a result of his imprudence took place immediately.

Showing the seriousness with which the British House regards such matters, even though Mr. Dalton resigned the matter was referred to a special committee for a full investigation. Referring to the Dalton case among others, Professor S. R. Finer in public administration says that it was a case which raised "such doubts about his personal prudence and integrity as to cause him to resign".

That is exactly the present case. This is not the first time the Minister has found himself in difficulties. He signed approval of the Gillespie contract and forgot that he had signed or seen it. It must be recalled that Mr. Gillespie was in a position to

profit as a result of a measure included in the first budget presented by this Minister.

While the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) was satisfied that there was nothing in the guidelines to concern him in that episode, this is not a mere matter of guidelines. This is a matter reaching into the very heart of parliamentary integrity.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Nielsen: What of the Minister's integrity? It would seem even redundant now to discuss it. It is a thing of rags and tatters. Prudence is a word that cannot be uttered in the same breath as the present Minister of Finance (Mr. Lalonde).

There is extant a video tape showing the previous Minister of Finance at a photo opportunity and deliberately holding the page of his budget address close because, as he explains, "The cameramen are equipped with farseeing lenses". I am referring now to the previous Minister who, when caught in the same circumstances, held his budget close. He would not open the pages because he was aware of the telephoto lenses. That was his attitude at that time.

This Minister is entirely different. He clowned, he joked, and he talked in his interview of zoom lenses. I have a copy of that tape. He joked and said: "I hope you fellows do not have zoom lenses". He joked about the secrecy of that document and closed it up at one stage during that photo opportunity session so that it could not be seen. But he later opened it up to the exposure of the telephoto lenses. The question might be asked: Did he know that they were shooting the pages of the budget as he turned them? He certainly was aware of the availability of zoom lenses because he himself mentioned that fact. All the time that this was going on and he was basking in the sunshine of self-indulgent publicity, his budget was being transferred to video tape. The great video leak was in full swing.

This is one of the great TV bloopers of all time and should certainly get an award for inanity. The Prime Minister was handing out ACTRA awards the other night. He should have reserved one for the Minister of Finance.

As a result of this Minister's culpable indiscretion and lack of prudence, he has created a fatal flaw in the confidence of the House and the country. What was opened as a crack in the Gillespie affair is now a virtual chasm. It is a chasm that the Minister cannot cross. As a result of his clowning and desire for personal publicity, he made available across this country, to the money markets and financial circles, an advance knowledge of the budget which could be used for personal gain.

Anyone with a knowledge of finance, being aware of the amount of the deficit revealed by the Minister and the amount