

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, July 24, 1969

The house met at 2 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. HOWARD (SKEENA)—CONFLICT IN
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Mr. Frank Howard (Skeena): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege of which I have given Your Honour notice. The question of privilege relates to answers given to two questions, one of which was provided yesterday, and a return made pursuant to an order passed by the house in February relating to certain correspondence between the government and a public relations firm.

I should like first to refer to the order for return for correspondence between the public relations firm of Berger, Tisdall, Clark and Lesley Limited and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. There is within that return, under the heading of "Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Indian Affairs Branch", a payment voucher which says in part:

Pay to: Glendon College Forum

Cheque to be sent to:

J. Shelton, Room 790 by August 28, 1968.

The payment voucher also contains the following information:

Date: 22/8/68

Interim payment to prepare a report on student attitudes to Indian problems as per attached service contract dated 9/8/68.

Amount: \$500.

One of the questions I asked was whether the report referred to had been completed. I was not sure whether the date "9/8/68" referred to September 8, 1968 or August 9, 1968, so in the earlier instance I inquired with respect to September 8, 1968. The answer I received was:

This department has no knowledge of any service contract dated September 8, 1968 or any subsequent report on student attitudes to Indian problems pursuant to that service contract.

Thinking I had the wrong date, I rephrased the question and asked again for the information relating to the report on student attitudes to Indian problems pursuant to a service contract dated August 9, 1968. This appeared to

be the correct date of the payment voucher. The answer I received was:

A search of the records has been made and no contract dated August 9, 1968 for the purpose of studying student attitudes to Indian problems was found.

In consequence of the two answers provided, each of which said there was no contract or none could be found, and the information provided in the order for return in the form of a photostatic copy of a payment voucher in the amount of \$500 to prepare a report on student attitudes to Indian problems as per attached service contract dated that day, I submit that the privileges of the house have been offended and incorrect information has been provided to the house in the answers to the questions or the answer provided in the order for return. Therefore I believe there is a question of privilege. I wish to make a motion. It is perhaps not written as legibly as Your Honour would like it to be but I move, seconded by the hon. member for Timiskaming (Mr. Peters):

That the answers to question Nos. 2,096 and 2,466, and a return provided pursuant to the motion for production of papers No. 77, and the apparent conflict between these documents be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for Skeena gave the Chair notice of the question of privilege he proposes to bring to the attention of the house at this time. I have given the matter consideration and I have listened with interest to the submissions of the hon. member.

On past occasions we have had the suggestion made to the house that this type of complaint against answers given by ministers legitimately gives rise to a question of privilege. I have very serious doubts about this. Hon. members know there are many precedents to indicate that the failure of a minister or a department to give a reply, or the fact that a member may not be satisfied with an answer given by a minister, or that a member may think that two answers are contradictory, or that the answer given is contrary to the facts, does not do so. All this in my estimation is debatable, and in any event, according to our precedents, has never been a legitimate foundation for questions of privilege and, as far as I can judge such cases have never been