

Order Paper Questions

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Forrestall: Mr. Speaker, I rise with respect to the privileges of members of the House. I have 15 questions on the order paper, some dating back to October 12 last year and seven or eight preceding this parliament. In the dying days of this session I hope Your Honour may be able to direct himself to answering the fear that my colleague has indicated is growing in regard to questions on the order paper which pertain to a politically sensitive area and instructions coming from ministers to delay responses.

My questions range from No. 160, dated October 12, to the last one about three months ago. The questions seek information that is of essential interest to the maritime shipping community in Canada. Perhaps the failure to answer arises from the failure of Statistics Canada and other data collecting organizations to provide the appropriate data for the answers. One or two of the questions even go back one full parliament. It would be a very simple thing for the parliamentary secretary to the minister responsible to rise and say that the data is not available and will not be available for a long time. A member would then have the opportunity to seek unanimous consent to withdraw the question.

I do not like the abuse of order paper questions which has been demonstrated by some of my colleagues in the chamber, and I know it has contributed to the workload of the departments. A lot of questions are irrelevant, but on the other hand members of parliament do have a right to ask questions. Where the answer is not given because the question is politically sensitive or because the appropriate information is not available, some other method of dealing with them must be found.

In the four or five parliaments during which I have sat in this chamber through the grace of the people of Dartmouth-Halifax East, I have always been left with a long list of unanswered questions. Those questions are never to the political disadvantage of the ruling party, but seek answers that are important to the maritime community which comprises a major portion of my riding. Mr. Speaker, I submit it is incumbent upon your office and your officers to direct yourselves to this question, in the hope that in the dying days of this session a better method will be found to deal with questions on the order paper.

Questions 160, 163, 174, 1,249, 1,396 and 2,156—I will not list the others—are vitally important to the changing trade patterns between this country and others upon whom we must rely for our well-being and our balance of trade payments. I think some of these questions could have been dealt with by the parliamentary secretary to the appropriate minister indicating that the information is not the type usually collected by departments and agencies of this government, and requesting that they be withdrawn. Hon. members would be willing to accept that, but we are not happy to sit through two parliaments without an answer to a simple, non-partisan question. I appreciate the indulgence of the House, Mr. Speaker.

[Mr. McCleave.]

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I am certainly prepared to listen to other hon. members, but I think we should disabuse our minds of what constitutes a question of privilege. As I indicated to the hon. member for Halifax-East Hants (Mr. McCleave) last week, there is no obligation upon the government to answer questions. Accordingly, on technical grounds there is no opportunity for the Chair to find privilege when the government fails to answer a question. We recently changed our rules so that questions are answered every day instead of only two days a week, as previously. This provides an opportunity daily to ask whether the remaining questions shall be allowed to stand, and for hon. members to agree, as I am sure they will continue to do, that their questions remain unanswered. That does not change the character of the exercise and form a question of privilege, however.

Mr. Baldwin: Mr. Speaker, I will grieve very briefly. Today the Secretary of State (Mr. Roberts) filed what he calls a green paper on access to government documents, but which I call a black paper. In effect, it constitutes a repudiation by the government of any intention to bring in legislation. The successive shocks they have suffered over the last few weeks with regard to information show this. At page 5 there is a very pertinent observation indicating why it might not be necessary. The green paper states, at page 5:

● (1610)

Third, a statute creating an obligation for departments to respond directly to public applications for access to government documents might reduce the role of the member of parliament as seeker of information for, and articulator and defender of, the interests of his constituents. Opportunity for the public to seek documents directly from departments and agencies might lessen contact between citizens and members. On the other hand, the criteria for production of documents under notices of motions for the production of papers would have to correspond to any exemptions—

I quote that because after our experience in this House, mine over a great many years, and particularly the very laudable observations made by the two hon. members who preceded me that they are not getting information, not getting the documents, and there have not been the answers, it makes this observation at page 5 hypocritical. I just put that before the Chair for its understanding.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. O'Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Twenty-seven days ago I drew to the attention of the parliamentary secretary questions Nos. 1,941 and 1,945. The parliamentary secretary said, in reply to that representation: "I will do my best to try and get the answers for him." I certainly hope the parliamentary secretary, given his reputation, will not be misleading the House and will get those answers for me.

Mr. Speaker: Shall the remaining questions be allowed to stand?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.