

Mr. Gray: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege. With respect to the reference by the Leader of the Opposition to the attendance of the Minister of Finance, I should like to say that I am here also in my capacity as Acting Minister of Finance and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance is present as well and we are available to answer questions.

Mr. Stanfield: I am delighted, Mr. Speaker. Can the Acting Minister of Finance tell the House whether it is proposed immediately or very soon to have a meeting with provincial representatives to consider ways in which the federal government and the provinces can co-operate in stimulating employment this winter?

Mr. P. M. Mahoney (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, a meeting of finance ministers is scheduled for December 7 and 8 and I would expect that matter might be on the agenda.

Mr. Stanfield: Am I to understand there have not been to date and are not now under way any systematic consultations with the provinces to canvass possible methods of stimulating employment this winter? Am I to assume that from what the Parliamentary Secretary said?

Mr. Speaker: I think that the question as asked is certainly argumentative in form. When the Leader of the Opposition asks whether he can assume a conclusion from the answer given by the Parliamentary Secretary, I would think the question is not in order in those terms. Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition might rephrase the question.

Mr. Stanfield: Mr. Speaker, are there any systematic consultations under way at present with the provinces to canvass possible methods of stimulating employment this winter through co-operation?

Hon. Arthur Laing (Acting Prime Minister): I must say I was a little surprised at the prelude to the question asked today by the Leader of the Opposition in the matter of unemployment. I want to assure him that the government is fully conscious of the levels of unemployment and fully aware of the necessity of effecting plans and policies that will encourage employment. These are being studied today and have been studied for weeks. It is anticipated that announcements will be made shortly which will have the effect of stimulating employment—

Mr. Ricard: We have been told that for years.

An hon. Member: You don't mean "stimulating", you mean "simulating".

Mr. Laing:—in the field which is the total responsibility of the government and encouraging it in the private sector.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanfield: I appreciate the statement by the Minister of Public Works but I wonder if it would be too much for either the Minister of Public Works or the Parliamen-

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tary Secretary to answer the question I asked, namely, whether there are under way now any systematic consultations with the provinces with regard to possible methods of stimulating employment?

Mr. Mahoney: I will take that question as notice.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Woolliams: I rise on a point of order, Mr. Speaker. There may be a very good reason—I would like to hear it and I think the House would—for the absence of so many ministers and of the Prime Minister today. We do not know who the acting prime minister is and we do not know why these ministers are not here today. Surely we could have that settled. It seems such a waste of time to ask questions in this institution at this time with nobody to answer them. I see Your Honour is getting a little uneasy, but may I point out with the greatest respect that I think it is very important to settle this matter if Parliament is to live at all. There may be a good reason for their absence. If that reason is given to the opposition I am sure we will listen to it and give it the kind of hearing that it deserves, but surely we are entitled to hear it.

Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale): Perhaps I could indicate on the point of order that there may well have been a very good reason for the absence for two days this week of the Leader of the Opposition. This is only his second day here this week.

An hon. Member: He does not have to answer to the House.

An hon. Member: He is not the Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker: I do not think there should be a debate on the point. I would think the point of order raised by the hon. member for Calgary North is a valid one—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Speaker:—but at the same time I do not think it should give rise to a debate.

Mr. Lewis: Mr. Speaker, I should like to speak to the point of order. I do not think that the point raised by the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. member for Calgary North is an irrelevant one and I think that the kind of answer which the Minister of National Defence gave is irrelevant. I suggest that we should know the reason why the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and the President of the Treasury Board, who were due to be here today, are not here. There may well be good reasons for it but we should know them. I had questions for the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance. I do not intend to ask a question just to hear a Parliamentary Secretary tell me he will take notice of it. I certainly would not have an answer to the question. I think we should have an explanation from the Acting Prime Minister, who I imagine is the Minister of Public Works, as to why these leaders of the government are not here today when they are due to be here.