

Oral Questions

I want to ask the government how it can keep maintaining that the Minister of Canadian Heritage committed an honest mistake, knowing now it was not an isolated incident but common practice for this minister.

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition was once a minister, and he knows that as such, one has certain responsibilities. For instance, when people write to complain about the content of television programs, a minister not only has the right but also a responsibility to refer such complaints to the CRTC, which was done in the case of the seven letters. It is, after all, the minister's responsibility to make appropriate references to the CRTC.

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I may recall that five ministers were caught sending letters of support and, in four cases, letters very specifically advising the CRTC of that support, which means they were directly and unduly interfering with the CRTC's decision-making process.

I want to ask the government how many more letters from the minister it will take to convince the government of the minister's lack of judgment. Does the Deputy Prime Minister share the position taken yesterday by the Minister of Immigration that a minister should not communicate directly with an agency for which he is responsible, thus directly condemning the behaviour of his colleague for Canadian Heritage vis-à-vis the CRTC?

Are we to understand that in the mind of the government, in the mind of the Deputy Prime Minister, there are two codes of ethics, one for the Minister of Immigration and one for the Minister of Canadian Heritage?

[English]

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition was a minister.

In his capacity as a minister he was required from time to time to write to bodies that were under his authority. Not only did he have the right to contact those bodies he had the responsibility.

It seems to me that when the minister responsible for communications receives complaints from the public about the cost, for example, of cable increases he not only has the right to refer those letters to the CRTC he has the responsibility.

The Leader of the Opposition would be the first person to complain if the minister responsible for communications refused to communicate with the body that develops those kinds of regulations. That is his responsibility. He is doing his job and he will continue to do his job under the guidelines that the Prime Minister has now established.

• (1420)

[Translation]

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when we hear the Prime Minister promise a stricter code of ethics for the future, what the Deputy Prime Minister just said is not reassuring. She promises that things will go on as before since there are no objections. I may remind the government that under Prime Ministers Joe Clark and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, there were specific rules prohibiting ministers from communicating directly with tribunals like the CRTC.

To show how far removed the Minister of Canadian Heritage is from the real world, I would ask the government to consider the fact that one of the letters that the minister sent to the CRTC and that were revealed this morning is dated October 13, less than two weeks after he received absolution for his first blunder, the letter of support dated March 15. Does the Deputy Prime Minister not realize that the hon. member for Laval West lacks the judgment required of a minister and that he is inept and thus incapable of performing the duties of a minister?

[English]

Hon. Sheila Copps (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a copy of the letter in question. I would like to table it, along with the other letters that have been referred to, because I think they make the point very clearly that the minister was only carrying out his job, his responsibilities and his function as minister.

What he was responding to was a letter from the member of Parliament for Okanagan—Similkameen—Merritt who wrote to the minister complaining on behalf of a constituent about cable television rates.

The minister in his capacity as minister for communications very appropriately referred this letter from the member for Okanagan—Similkameen—Merritt to the CRTC. If he had ignored the letter or thrown it in the waste basket, which seems to be the reference of the hon. member, he would have been in breach of his duty.

We believe the minister should carry out his duties in the context of the very strict guidelines that have been established by the Prime Minister to avoid any conflict of interest.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, according to the Canadian Press, the government's ethics counsellor, Mr. Howard Wilson, had signing authority for federal contracts taken away from him in July 1992 as the result of an investigation by the Auditor General himself. This action was taken against him for having awarded contracts worth close to a million dollars without a call for tenders.