

Speaker's Ruling

There is no longer a concern about how impossible it may be to answer.

I think we would also have to agree that this is sometimes the case. The Chief Government Whip as reported at page 2340 of *Hansard* commented that "the form in which some come forward to Government put a kind of strait-jacket on us". He also reminded the House that, as I have remarked on many occasions before, the Chair must interpret the Standing Orders as they exist. If some aspect of the rules are unsatisfactory to the House, it is the House that must provide the remedy. The Chief Government Whip's reference to the number of unanswerable questions in the last Parliament points out a particular problem, and I was very interested in his suggestion, minor alterations in form might have made it possible to answer many of those questions fairly quickly.

• (1510)

[*Translation*]

The Hon. Member for Ottawa—Vanier (Mr. Gauthier) argued ably for a continuation of current practice in regard to these questions: that is the transformation of questions requiring long answers into Orders for Returns—the latter to be tabled immediately, or at some later time. He stressed the role of the Chair as the protector of all Members' rights: a role that the Chair must certainly always bear in mind.

[*English*]

The Hon. Member for Kamloops (Mr. Riis) indicated the possibility that the practices of the House may have changed so greatly in the last 60 years that to invoke a rule which has fallen into disuse as it stands may be to risk moving counter to the spirit in which it was originally adopted. Both he and the Hon. Member for Hamilton East (Ms. Copps) put the matter in the context of the recent parliamentary reforms which have done so much to revitalize the House.

The Hon. Member for Okanagan—Similkameen—Merritt (Mr. Whittaker) pointed out that there is very little explicit indication in the Standing Orders of what length or degree of complication a question should have. The Hon. Member for Mackenzie (Mr. Althouse) was

able to assist us with his experience on the McGrath Committee where such guidelines had been discussed.

He went on to make several other points that the Members of the House ought to be left to decide for themselves whether or not to give notice of a motion similar to their question; that the framer of a question is a participant in the process and should expect the quality of the question to have a strong effect on the framing of the answer; and that most Members would consider a response declining to answer the question, for a stated reason, to be legitimate.

[*Translation*]

Finally, the Hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands (Mr. Milliken) pointed out that a Private Member's Notice of Motion had a far better chance of coming before the House formerly than it has now. He suggested that either the proposal of the Parliamentary Secretary or the Standing Order itself might profitably be referred to the Procedure Committee for study and review.

[*English*]

The Chair has now had time to consider the matter at length. The use of Standing Order 39(6) appears simple enough at the outset; but as we have seen, upon examination it grows more complex and elusive.

The dilemma is this: we must find a balance between the urgent requirements of Members who need information in order to function and the equal imperative of a rational and fair use of the limited resources available to provide answers.

In an attempt to find this balance, the Hon. Parliamentary Secretary asked the Chair several days ago to act under the provision of Standing Order 39(6), which permits—and I wish to emphasize the word "permits"—the Speaker to transform into a Notice of Motion any question which is brought to his attention by the Government and which he considers would require a "lengthy" reply.

[*Translation*]

I must emphasize, at the outset, that the Parliamentary Secretary's request is indeed quite legitimate and well within the bounds of our Standing Orders. As a matter of fact, this practice, if implemented in today's House, would certainly go some distance to solving the problem we have outlined. The pressure of the 45-day limit in which to provide "lengthy" answers would be relieved. Since not all of these motions would be agreed to, or even considered, the work-hours available might be