

Point of Order—Mr. W. Baker

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Subject to his denial, I say that was a planted question. The minister had his music with him for the answer. That was bad enough, but, Madam Speaker, you have admonished the opposition, and we accept the admonishment because it is correct, for abusing the question period by giving long preambles to questions and motions under Standing Order 43. We accept that because the proper way for the question period to be handled is with as much crispness as possible.

It is important, if this question period is to mean anything, that answers not carry on the way the answer of the Secretary of State did. It went on long before there was any disruption or calls for order from this side of the House. When it goes on so long that it is not even a neighbour to crispness in its characterization, the Chair must intervene. Otherwise, question period will slowly and irrevocably deteriorate to a point beyond which it has already deteriorated.

We are prepared to accept your views or rulings, Madam Speaker, with respect to crispness in our questions, but when the Secretary of State went on and on and on in his answer beyond what could be considered a normal length for an answer, an answer that was abusive, political and all the rest of it as well as being too long, then we have to rise. Our only defence to that kind of process before an intervention by the Chair is to shout "Order", just as the defence to too long a preamble to a question or Standing Order 43 motion is to shout "Order" from the government side.

Madam Speaker, you need some assistance from the House with respect to this matter. I say to you now, as the House leader of the opposition, that we are prepared to do our best to assist you by undertaking that we will keep our preambles short. However, there is a *quid pro quo* in this House of Commons. We need some kind of assurance from the Chair, the government House leader and certainly from ministers of the Crown, who are supposed to be knowledgeable about the rules of this House and should not abuse them, that they in turn will help improve the quality of the question period.

If the Chair needs assistance, I want to say it will have that assistance from the opposition. It is important that some kind of undertaking come from the government House leader so that the spontaneity of the question period will not be lost. I say that with great seriousness. It is important that you intervene, Madam Speaker, and when you do you will have support for that intervention from this side of the House with respect to those matters for which we are normally responsible, namely the asking of questions.

I felt I had to rise and say that to you, Madam Speaker. If the hon. member for Kitchener tells me that his question was spontaneous, that he had not in fact consulted with respect to the question, naturally I will accept that. However, even if that is so, the answer was far too long. In fact, Madam Speaker, if you review the question, you will see that it could have been answered—

Some hon. Members: Order.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): It could have been answered—

Some hon. Members: Order.

Madam Speaker: Order, please.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): That question could have been answered by a simple yes or no, with a short explanation. I think there has been an abuse today. The practice has to stop.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Yvon Pinard (President of the Privy Council): Madam Speaker, I am a little surprised by the intervention of the opposition House leader. All the more so because if the Secretary of State (Mr. Fox) did take some time to answer—and I shall come back to the nature of the answer he has given to the hon. member for Kitchener (Mr. Lang)—it is because he was constantly being interrupted not by the shouts of the opposition but by the screams of some members opposite. I could see the hon. member for Calgary Centre (Mr. Andre) who was behaving like a madman, Madam Speaker, and who was screaming to prevent the Secretary of State from giving a coherent answer. I find this not only childish but very disrespectful of this institution. That is the sad and poor image we project because of the irresponsible attitude of the hon. member for Calgary Centre with his uncontrolled screams.

I was present, I watched him. I see that the hon. member is here and I will tell him to his face: his attitude has been irresponsible and degrading to this institution and I find that deplorable. Madam Speaker, I could single out several other members but I do not sit in the House to supply the gossip column of the hon. member for Leeds-Grenville (Mr. Cossitt) who is absent. Be that as it may, I feel that basically the official opposition House leader is right to look forward to an oral question period which as a whole would unfold in a more orderly fashion, but I would not like him to put the blame on government members only.

It happens very frequently that members from his side ask questions with very long preambles and very long argument. It also happens that they get from this side some rather short answers. I admit also that occasionally members of the government give some rather long answers, but the questions are so long that it is sometimes inviting to give a complete answer and use more time for that purpose.

I come to the point he raised, namely the question put by the hon. member for Kitchener. The House leader of the official opposition seems to suggest that it is not customary—and I do not know if there was indeed prior consultation between the hon. member and the Secretary of State—to give a minister notice of a question. On the contrary, that happens quite regularly and should be done more often, and even opposition members do it.