

Oral Questions

DEPUTY MINISTER'S MEMORANDUM OF JANUARY, 1981

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands): Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister says that the Minister first was aware of this transaction in January, 1981. He will have looked at the memorandum from the Deputy Minister to the then Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, now the Minister of Finance. The memorandum addressed to the Minister, dated January 15, 1981, states:

You will recall that Mr. Gillespie has organized the Scotia Coal Synfuels Project whose object is to study the possibilities for the liquefaction of coal in Cape Breton—

I would like to know what the Prime Minister makes of that statement which says that his Minister of Finance would have recalled that transaction before January 15, and whether or not, over night or today, he has questioned the Minister of Finance to see what date it was that he knew, before January 15.

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, I have not questioned the Minister. I repeat, I heard him answer questions very clearly this morning that that was the earliest recollection he had of any knowledge as acquired from the documents themselves of the transaction. The House heard the Minister go on to say that he was not swearing that there had not been any previous knowledge, he just had no recollection of it. The Minister went on to make the point, which I make, that in this sense dates are irrelevant from the point of view of that Minister, since he is bound, regardless of dates, by the guidelines which say there should be no privileged access.

Miss MacDonald: I find the Prime Minister's answer incredible when in the first instance his defence of the Minister was made on the basis of dates which he provided to the House.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

STATEMENT BY MINISTER OF FINANCE IN NOVEMBER, 1980

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands): I would like to ask the Prime Minister, since he cannot have it both ways, since he cannot argue that the dates matter one way one day and they do not matter another day, has he followed up the question which was put to him yesterday, by my colleague, the Hon. Member for Don Valley West, with respect to the Minister's statement before the Committee on Alternative Energy and Oil Substitution on November 25, 1980, when the Minister indicated that he was aware of projects being undertaken by Petro-Canada with regard to coal liquefaction? Has he followed up on that particular request to find out if the Minister was aware that one of those coal liquefaction projects was indeed the one in Cape Breton?

• (1420)

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): No, Madam Speaker, I have not. I took note that we were having a debate

today on this whole subject and that the Minister was subject to questioning. I would have thought that the Hon. Member could have inquired directly from the Minister.

Miss MacDonald: The Prime Minister shirks his responsibility.

Mr. Trudeau: If the question was not asked by one of the Opposition or not asked by the hon. lady from Kingston, maybe she is shirking her responsibility.

As to the question of dates, I want to clear up that matter. It is true that on the first day that this was raised, February 16, without any prior notice, and certainly without any occasion for me to refer to the guidelines which had been issued some few years before, I was listening to questions and attempting to answer them in terms of the questions asked.

I note that in the second round of questions on the first day the subject was raised, February 16, the Hon. Member for Calgary Centre feeds into his question the problem of two years as being a critical date. Then there is an exchange between myself and the Hon. Member for Yukon as to what the dates are. Then the Hon. Member for Calgary Centre comes back with dates again.

I just want to say that not having had notice of the subject, being told that in some way two years was a critical period, not having the guidelines before me, I said well, if two years is critical, it appears from the facts that are being alleged that it has been more than two years, so I was answering with the defence in terms of the accusations made.

Since then the accusations have become more precise. They have referred not to the post-employment guidelines but to the role of the Minister himself. The Minister this morning, and certainly the Deputy Prime Minister and myself have all conceded that the dates are irrelevant, that a Minister is bound in his dealings with former office holders whether it is a period of six months or two years.

REASON FOR PRIME MINISTER CORRECTING STATEMENT

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands): Madam Speaker, if the dates are irrelevant, why did the Prime Minister consider it necessary to come into the House yesterday to correct what he said previously?

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, quite obviously, because I had—

Miss MacDonald: Mised the House.

Mr. Trudeau: The Hon. Member says "mised the House". I used the words myself yesterday. I had given a date to the House based on some information which appeared to be wrong. I can hardly see how the Hon. Member can seriously fault me for having set that information right and, at the same time, reproach me with talking of dates. Dates are the area in which there was wrong information. Therefore it was surely my duty to set it right at the first opportunity.