

Inquiries of the Ministry

information in relation to the estimates which I tabled this afternoon. That is quite true. I did so. I have done it before. It was done before I became Minister of Finance. It has been done for years to the knowledge of hon. members opposite, that is those who have any knowledge of what has been taking place.

I am quite sure, Mr. Speaker, that every adult member of the house, at any rate, is quite well aware of the fact that, for instance, at the time of the budget address copies of that address are made available to the press several hours before it is made available to the house, but under terms of the strictest secrecy. Those terms of secrecy have never been violated by the press. This is a sound practice. I did not introduce it. It was the practice before I became the Minister of Finance. I think it is a good practice, and unless the house expresses disapproval I intend to follow that practice. It is a practice in relation to many matters, Mr. Speaker, that copies of announcements may be made available to the press in advance on condition there is no release of the information until the information is tabled in the house. This practice is followed—

Mr. McIlraith: No complaint about that.

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton):—not infrequently in relation to important statements in regard to government policy or as to things that have happened. This, again, is a sound, salutary practice and is by no means new.

What happened this afternoon, what happened last year and the year before, was that those members of the press gallery who were interested were given access to a copy of the estimates and to the summary to which I have referred which was prepared for their use. They were given that information under terms of the strictest secrecy, and they were not permitted to release any of the information until I had tabled the estimates in the house.

Back of this seems to be a suggestion that there is some feeling on the part of hon. members opposite that the press gallery should not be entrusted with this information.

Mr. McIlraith: No. That is a misrepresentation of what I said.

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): I say quite firmly that I have no qualms whatever about making this kind of information available to the members of the press gallery on the terms which I have mentioned and which fully reserve the rights and privileges of all members of this house. The members of the press gallery have shown themselves to be men of impeccable honour in this regard, and I do not see any reason why they should not be trusted as in the past.

[Mr. Fleming (Eglinton).]

Hon. L. B. Pearson (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, the minister has of course followed his usual course of drawing extravagant, unwarranted and irrelevant deductions from what we on this side have said.

Mr. Hees: Question.

Mr. Fulton: Is it a question of privilege?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Leader of the Opposition has the floor. I have given the floor to the Leader of the Opposition to speak on this alleged question of privilege which has been raised. The Leader of the Opposition has been given the opportunity to deal with it before I come to a conclusion.

Mr. Pearson: No one on this side is questioning the propriety or the right of the minister if he sees fit, in confidence, to give the press advance information on this particular matter. I ask the minister, however, whether he does not think, as was the case in the past—and by “past” I mean before 1957, when different methods were introduced—it would have been appropriate to have shown equal courtesy to leaders of the opposition parties by giving them advance notice, in confidence, so that members of the opposition parties could have had that information available when they were debating the budget on the last afternoon of the budget debate.

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): Mr. Speaker, this is not a matter that affects the budget. What we are discussing this afternoon in the order that has been announced is a budget that has relationship to the balance of ways and means for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1961. The estimates which I tabled this afternoon are the estimates for the financial year commencing April 1, 1961.

Mr. Pearson: There is no relation?

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): I think there is another observation that may very properly be made in reply to the Leader of the Opposition. On two previous occasions I have made statements in the house at the time of tabling the estimates, pointing out the highlights in those estimates, thinking that this might be of interest and perhaps of assistance to hon. members of the house in reviewing the estimates when a copy came into their hands. But this attempt to give information to the house was met, on the part of the official opposition, with a storm of protest on all those occasions.

Mr. Pearson: Political propaganda.

Mr. Fleming (Eglinton): Therefore I have sought today to economize the time of the house, not by making comment on the estimates but by acquainting hon. members with