

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, October 15, 1968

The house met at 2.30 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. MACINNIS (CAPE BRETON-EAST RICHMOND)—ATTENDANCE OF MINISTERS DURING QUESTION PERIOD

Mr. Donald MacInnis (Cape Breton-East Richmond): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege affecting all hon. member of the house with reference to their efforts to obtain information from the government benches. It deals also with the question of the schedule for the attendance of ministers as provided by the government and the question of who is an acting minister and when he is an acting minister; because we have had an acting minister of public works while the actual minister was in his office on the third floor, and we have had an acting minister when the President of the Treasury Board was in his office on the floor below. It also involves the question of whether members are entitled to direct questions to ministers in capacities other than of departments they represent.

Here I would refer to a previous ruling in this house by Mr. Speaker on April 1, 1966. I quote from the fourth paragraph, second column, at page 3756 of *Hansard* for that date:

I still feel today just as strongly as I did a few days ago that it should not be the policy in the house that ministers be asked to answer questions, whether written questions or verbal questions, in any capacity other than in their official capacities.

It would follow, Mr. Speaker, that if members are denied the privilege of asking such questions, then no minister should be entitled to answer in any other capacity than in that of the department for which he is responsible.

On the question of acting ministers Mr. Speaker's ruling on April 1, 1966 went on to say:

While considering this matter in recent days it was brought to my attention—and I must say I understood this—that in some instances certain ministers are given areas of responsibility. For example, I might say that the Minister without Portfolio (Mr. Turner) in the present government is given, by acknowledgement on the part of the government, that portion of government responsibility in the realm of transport, is asked questions

in that regard, and is expected to answer questions about the Department of Transport although he is not the Minister of Transport.

It would follow, Mr. Speaker, that rather than what happened on Friday last, when eight ministers were trying to answer questions that were correctly the responsibility of 29 ministers, acting ministers should be pre-designated by the government. That, sir, is the interpretation, and rightly or wrongly I do not see any other possible interpretation that could be taken from Mr. Speaker's ruling of April 1, 1966.

With respect to the scheduling of the attendance of ministers, we all realize that this is an experiment which the government is conducting. But surely, Mr. Speaker, members of the government should acknowledge the fact that the experiment is not working. Today members received a release dated October 11, 1968, giving a revised schedule of attendance. But, Mr. Speaker, errors can clearly be seen in it which will make it very difficult for members of the opposition to obtain the information they may be seeking.

● (2:40 p.m.)

I wish to call the attention of the government to the fact that on Mondays the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury), the Minister of Finance and Receiver General (Mr. Benson), the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce (Mr. Pepin) and the minister of National Revenue (Mr. Coté) are all absent. I would think that normally in the absence of one of these ministers any one of the other three would be able to take his place in an acting capacity. Nevertheless all four are to be absent on Mondays. This means that questions in the realm of trade and commerce and finance would have to be taken by the government as notice for reply on another day. In this event it would not be possible to treat the questions as matters of urgency.

I referred to this matter of urgency previously. If any given member should have a question of urgent importance he could have to wait from Wednesday until Tuesday in order to have the question answered because the minister concerned would be absent on Thursday and Friday. This, as I say, again would remove it from the urgency bracket.