

Management Information Systems

• (5:40 p.m.)

Mr. Benjamin: Not if he is a Liberal.

Mr. Howard (Skeena): And he wants information provided.

Mr. Francis: Often we do not know what he is asking for.

Mr. Howard (Skeena): Mr. Speaker, if you will protect me in this instance from the hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis) I will be able to continue my remarks. In this instance the notice of motion for the production of papers arose out of a response to a question. I am not trying to explain what the hon. member for Moose Jaw (Mr. Skoberg) wanted. The fact is that he was provided with some information in response to a question and he wanted to follow the matter up and learn more about what was taking place. So he took the initiative of filing a notice of motion for the production of papers, as is proper and correct. It was then incumbent on the government, or someone representing the government, under our rules to respond to that notice of motion for the production of papers.

In this case the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Caccia) responded in the House on November 18 of last year and said that the report sought in the notice of motion was prepared for the department by a private firm, that the report contained matters confidential to the department and that therefore he regretted that it could not be tabled. Nobody knows exactly what the word "confidential" means in that context, that is, no one outside the government, because a person who has not looked at the report is not in a position to make any determination, so far as Parliament is concerned, regarding its confidentiality.

The matter was transferred to this hour for consideration and debate and for an eventual vote in the House in order that there might be a determination of whether or not the report should be made public on the basis of the explanation given regarding its confidentiality. Perhaps we have the rules a little backwards here; nevertheless, that is how the rules are. The rules are such that when an individual member poses a question in the first place, he finds himself in an impossible position. Not having seen the document and not knowing what is in it, he cannot argue that it should be made public. When the government has such a document and says it is confidential, members are placed in an impossible position because, as I say, they do not know what is in it.

We have run afoul of the rules, although we have tried to stand up many times and make our points. Mr. Speaker makes his rulings—I do not say this in any sense of disrespect to you, Sir—and applies the rules more strictly against the member seeking the information than against the government. We accept that. We have come to the conclusion that the best way to approach this matter is not to get up and attempt to justify the contents of the notice of motion without knowing what is in the report, but simply to let the government or the parliamentary secretary take the next step and explain to the House to the best of their ability why the matter is confidential.

[Mr. Howard (Skeena).]

In this instance the parliamentary secretary deliberately and consciously abused the rules of the House, because he did not say a single, solitary word about confidentiality. Do you know what he did, Mr. Speaker? He denied his own argument of November 18 and disclosed what he felt could be disclosed in the report. He made some explanation and suggested that other parts were confidential and could not be disclosed. I think that what probably happened is that he selected from the report those things which are politically advantageous to the party to which he belongs and kept under the rug those activities of the Department of Manpower and Immigration which are not advantageous to the party to which he belongs. That is playing politics with the public interest, and that is the sort of thing you yourself permitted when I raised the first question and you said, "Oh, yes, that is the rule, but we allow lots of leeway."

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Howard (Skeena): In the course of the parliamentary secretary's comments we did not hear anything about confidentiality—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. The hon. member no doubt is aware that the rules do not permit him to pass any reflection on the decision of the Chair or on any interpretation by the Chair of the rules of this House. The Chair has tried to abide by the rules and to interpret them as clearly as possible. At the same time, the Chair has the responsibility of giving, in some cases, latitude to hon. members. It is very difficult for the occupant of the chair to stand up every time hon. members bypass or try to bypass the rules. Hon. members know that the occupant of the chair, whoever he is, tries as much as possible to make a fair decision to protect hon. members and also to uphold the rules of the House. This having been done, hon. members know that they cannot contest or discuss it.

Mr. Howard (Skeena): If I might comment on the point you have raised, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Caccia: On a point of privilege, Mr. Speaker—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. Is the parliamentary secretary rising on a point of privilege?

Mr. Caccia: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of privilege because the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard) attributed to me a partisan approach to the debate, as if the material that we produce today was selected on grounds of a particular political nature instead of on the basis of what we within the department thought and felt could be developed for the debate this afternoon. This is—

An hon. Member: Shameful!

Mr. Caccia: —attributing to us an approach that we certainly do not accept. It is not our approach in the carrying out of our duties.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. Hon. members are aware that it is not permitted for them to