

Statistics Canada

Mr. Fabien Roy (Beauce): I want to make a few brief comments on the statement just made by the minister and of which I heard at the same time as my colleagues, since it was handed to us in the middle of the question period. I would like to ask the minister why a public announcement was made today when the minister said in the first paragraph of his statement:

I do not want my remarks to imply that I consider Statistics Canada to be ineffective or deficient in carrying out its mandate.

The minister does not want people to entertain any doubt as to the role assigned to Statistics Canada. Mr. Speaker, in my opinion, the first concern of every member here, on either side of the House, is that Statistics Canada must remain above suspicion. This agency must not be a political instrument in the hands of the government. It must be ready and willing to serve all members of Parliament, because Statistics Canada has historically been, and shall be even more so in the future, a guide for all members of Parliament and all political groups in this House. In the first place, the reports issued by Statistics Canada are used to figure the consumer price index, and this in turn is the basis for indexing Public Service pensions, personal income tax, old age security pensions, family allowances and a number of—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Beauce is entitled to put questions to the minister pursuant to Standing Order 15(3) and he should put them forthwith.

Mr. Roy (Beauce): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, although I can hardly understand why I should be treated differently this afternoon, when other members from the Liberal party and the New Democratic Party have had their chance to make their own comments, because it is stated in Standing Order 15, on page 10:

A spokesman for each of the parties in opposition to the government may comment briefly thereon and members may be permitted to address questions thereon to the minister.

The rules are the same whether they apply to the New Democratic Party or to the Social Credit Party of Canada.

I therefore respectfully submit that it is my right and privilege to add a few comments on the minister's statement as my colleagues have done.

Mr. Speaker, I can see that several members of this House would like to chair our proceedings, but nonetheless I would ask the minister, coming back to the first question, why he decided to announce publicly a private investigation of confidential documents at this point, rather than wait until he has more detailed information and to come up before this House with a concrete proposal. This would have prevented the credibility of Statistics Canada from being jeopardized.

[*English*]

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, in replying to the hon. member I would simply say that it has always been our undertaking that we would announce the appointment of the management con-

[Mr. Speaker.]

sultants to look into Statistics Canada, and that we would not only name the management consultants who were retained but would set out the terms of reference for the management consultants to follow.

Secondly, we felt that rather than incorporate in the management consultant terms of reference framework, if you like, an expert to look at the methodology, the expert should come from outside Canada. Incidentally, we felt that if we simply turned to somebody who was learned in statistical information within Canada there might be some suggestion that he was not objective enough to pass on Statistics Canada. As a result, we chose to go outside Canada to retain an expert in statistical science to pass on the methodology of the Statistics Canada operation. Incidentally, that is why, in answer to the question by a member of the NDP as to why we did not incorporate this all under one, I said we felt there was merit in divorcing the two; having the internal Canadian study dealing with organization, personnel and management, with the outside study dealing in a very objective way with the technical side of Statistics Canada and methodology.

Finally in answer to the hon. member's question, the reason we wanted to make it public that Price Waterhouse are commencing today is that I did not want to delay making a statement to the House, as it may well have become public, through the usual brown envelope or leak fashion, that Price Waterhouse was already conducting a study. I felt that I should inform the House at the first opportunity.

I once more apologize for the fact that the terms of reference are not available in both official languages for tabling. They were not settled until a few hours ago, and unfortunately the French version is not ready. I thought the second best thing, in order to get it before the House as quickly as possible, was simply to read it into the record.

Mr. Knowles: Mr. Speaker, may I put one question to the President of the Treasury Board. In his statement today about Statistics Canada he emphasized the importance of its work in connection with the indexing of old age security and other pensions and benefits. As the President of the Treasury Board will recall, in October I raised with the Prime Minister the question of a special index for senior citizens related to the things they have to buy. Outside the House that day the President of the Treasury Board said he would give serious consideration to that proposal. May I ask if any action has yet been taken on that?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to reply to that question. I did follow it up and a report has been prepared. If the hon. member feels that it would be helpful, I could either deliver it to him personally for his consideration or I could table the report in the House.