

Privilege—Mr. Cossitt

[English]

PRIVILEGEMR. COSSITT—LETTER FROM OFFICE OF MINISTER OF
NATIONAL HEALTH AND WELFARE

Mr. Tom Cossitt (Leeds-Grenville): Madam Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege. I thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to bring this up. I would have given longer notice had it been possible.

About an hour ago I received an envelope bearing the heading "Health and Welfare Canada", originating in the office of the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin), addressed to Tom Cossitt, MP, House of Commons, Ottawa. I feel it is absolutely pertinent to my question of privilege that I read the two short paragraphs that are contained in this letter or document along with the heading above. It reads as follows:

To: All Liberal Members of Parliament;
From: Sheila Zimmerman, Special Assistant
Date: July 1, 1980
Subject: New Horizons

You will find enclosed description of New Horizons projects submitted by groups in your riding which have been recommended in the most recent series.

The names of these projects will be announced to the press on July 9, 1980, by the Minister of Health and Welfare. If you have any objections to make about projects selected from your riding, please let us know before that date.

I feel it leads to this question which is a matter of privilege: do Liberal members have the right to veto New Horizons applications by groups of senior citizens in this country? After all, that is what it says right here. If it is true, it is a shocking breach of the privileges of this House and another travesty of justice respecting hundreds of senior citizens and groups of senior citizens from one end of Canada to the other.

This letter also indicates that the government does not consider all members of this House equal. In other words, although we are all members of Parliament duly elected by the people, over there there are privileges that we do not have. In this particular case I feel sure there is no one on this side who would want the privileges they have over there, namely, the right to rebuke and veto the legitimate applications of senior citizens.

The letter also contains more than just a mild and nasty implication that the government is using New Horizons grants for political purposes on behalf of the Liberal members of this House, which I contend is a breach of parliamentary privilege. According to this letter, they are given eight days to say, "Yes", or "No"; "We will permit this grant," or "We will not permit this grant," as the case may be. One can also wonder whether this same system that they have now applied to the New Horizons grants applies to all other grants this government is involved in when it comes to dealing with other types of things and other groups across this country.

In conclusion, I believe this shameful matter is definitely a matter of privilege. It should be investigated by the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. I would like to reserve

my right to move that it be referred to that committee if such appears to be appropriate in due course.

[Translation]

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, I suggest that the most serious mistake which this question of privilege has brought to light is to have considered the hon. member as a Liberal. Besides that, I should think that it would be elementary for the House to permit me to have a look at the letter or memorandum and to check its content. I saw this memorandum at the beginning of my tenure. As far as I can remember, it does not deal with a veto of any sort. This is an ordinary sort of memorandum which is sent to government members just like those which were sent by the previous government when they wanted to get an input from their own people about many community programs. It is clear and it is the basis for this whole argument, that if the hon. member prepared a list of all the New Horizon projects which have been approved in Canada, he would realize that all ridings get their fair share under this program, no matter their political affiliation, the political party of their elected members or their geographical situation in Canada. That is what matters. This is clear, and I have always encouraged hon. members to do this. I take this opportunity again to tell the hon. member directly who took offence and who raised this question of privilege, to contact the local office of the New Horizons program if he has representations to make. Sometimes, a number of hon. members may indicate to the minister's staff or the official in charge of the decentralized administration of this program, that such or such a group of senior citizens does not seem to submit a legitimate project. We would discuss the issue with hon. members and clear the air. There have been times even when projects were consolidated, that boards of directors were replaced by a more structured one, and other similar things. Therefore, I do not quite see the point of the hon. member's question of privilege, but I ask to reserve the elementary right to examine again the memorandum.

[English]

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, the hon. member is asking for the right to reserve this matter so he can bring a question of privilege later, after the minister has had a chance to review this very selective letter inviting a secret veto on various government programs, extending that right exclusively to members of Parliament on one side of the House, Liberal members of Parliament, and not to others. What is important to underline here is that in the initial remarks made by the minister, remarks based upon what she admits was a lack of information, the minister suggested that there was—

Miss Bégin: No.

Mr. Clark:—the minister tells me she did not say that, but she has not seen the memorandum.

Miss Bégin: I do not have it in my hand.