

Oral Question Procedure

● (1500)

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

HOUSE OF COMMONS**STATEMENT BY MR. SPEAKER ON PROCEDURE DURING ORAL QUESTION PERIOD**

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. On Monday last the House began an experiment with a change in procedure relating to the question period, Standing Order 43, supply and ministerial statements. I indicated earlier that I would make a statement today in respect of the changes. This statement concerns itself with the question period only and, as I indicated before the Easter break, ought to be taken as a reference point for discussion and consideration by members of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, where I will be happy to appear if members wish. It is therefore not so much a decision as an explanation of my understanding of how our question period should operate.

The question period is a unique feature of the Canadian House of Commons where the ministry is required to be accountable to the House on a daily basis without advance notice. It is an excellent feature of our parliament, and while we have much to learn from other governmental systems, the question period is one area in which we are in the forefront of responsible government, and every effort must be made to preserve the excellence of this practice.

The opportunity of members to put questions has developed in a rather haphazard way, but is now enshrined in Standing Order 39 and if it ever was considered to be a privilege of members, it certain now enjoys the status of a right. Much has been said in the precedents about restrictions and disqualifications or interferences with the right of members to put questions. This is not the approach I prefer to take in attempting to establish a rational approach and understanding concerning how the question period should operate. I much prefer to take the positive approach of attempting to arrive at a statement of principle within which questions can be put, and to reduce to an absolute minimum the negative disqualifications that may limit or restrict a member's right so to do.

In so doing, I should say that there seems to be no question that the Speaker enjoys discretion in allowing a question and certainly in allowing a supplementary. I think it is also important to begin with the rather wide latitude of discretion that is given ministers to whom questions are put. The fact is that ministers are able to make an answer, of course. They may also defer a question for further consideration or take it as notice. Ministers are able to make an explanation if for some reason they are unable to make an answer at that moment; or, finally, they may say nothing.

It therefore seems to me that any basic principle governing the question period ought to be such that it will enable members to put questions with a minimum of interference. In examining the many precedents, I feel that the principle can best be stated as follows: a brief question seeking information about an important matter of some urgency which falls within the administrative responsibility of the government or of the specific minister to whom

[Mr. Ouellet.]

it is addressed is in order. This statement bears some explanation. First, it must be a question. That seems to be too self-evident to be worth consideration. However, the fact of the matter is that that statement is put right at the beginning because it opposes such things as expressions of opinion, representations, argumentation or debate.

Second, the question must be brief. There can be no doubt that the greatest enemy of the question period is the member who offends this most important principle. In putting the original question on any subject, a member may require an explanatory remark, but there is no reason for such a preamble to exceed one carefully drawn sentence. It is my proposal to ask all hon. members to pay close attention to this admonition and to bring them to order if they fail to do so. It bears repeating that the long preamble or long question takes an unfair share of the time, and invariably, in provoking the same kind of response, only compounds the difficulty.

Replies ought to be subject to precisely the same admonition. On the subject of supplementaries, I again suggest to hon. members the adoption of a practice which recently was suggested by one of our provincial colleagues which is, if and when supplementary questions are allowed, there ought to be no need whatsoever for any preamble. The supplementary question is a follow-up device flowing from the response, and ought to be a precise question put directly and immediately to the minister, without any further statement.

Third, the question ought to seek information, and therefore cannot be based upon a hypothesis, it cannot seek an opinion either legal or otherwise, and must not suggest its own answer, be argumentative or make a representation.

Fourth, it ought to be on an important matter which, again, is self-evident but it is stressed here in order to rule out frivolous questions.

Fifth, the matter ought to be of some urgency. This is not included to intend in any way to be similar to those questions of urgency which are included within the Standing Orders surrounding special debates. It is here only to stress the fact that there must be some present value in seeking the information during the question period, as opposed to seeking it through the order paper or through correspondence with the minister or the department.

The fact that questions on the order paper also have been changed in the experimental order to daily responses, I am sure, is to all hon. members an indication of the good will and good intentions of the government in making more prompt answers to the questions on the order paper. If the government will do so, undoubtedly this will have a beneficial effect on the conduct of the oral question period.

At the same time, it goes without saying that the vexatious or frivolous use of the right of putting questions on the order paper by way of putting questions which do not seek the kind of information which can be available within a reasonable time, reasonable effort and expense, seems to me to be only a waste of the time of the House and to invite the government to use the excuse that it would take too long or cost too much money to make replies. In other words, a serious and conscientious atti-