

# HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, June 1, 1972

The House met at 2 p.m.

## ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[Translation]

### REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

First report of Standing Committee on Regional Economic Expansion, in both official languages—Mr. Guay.

[Editor's Note: For text of above report, see today's Votes and Proceedings.]

\* \* \*

[English]

### PUBLIC SERVICE

#### STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER ON COMMENTS IN 1971 ANNUAL REPORT OF COMMISSION CONCERNING APPOINTMENT BY MERIT

**Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister):** Mr. Speaker, the annual report of the Public Service Commission for 1971, which was tabled in the House as a routine matter yesterday, has this morning, received interpretation and comment in the press which is causing some concern, possibly based on misunderstanding. The basis of appointment to the public service, which is the question involved, is a matter of very real importance to the public and to this House. In all the circumstances, the government is of the opinion that the report should be referred to a committee of the House where the matter can be discussed with the chairman of the commission and where clarification can be secured.

• (1410)

It is not, I think, generally realized that the Public Service Commission is, by law, an independent agency responsible to Parliament, not to the government. It is independent by reason of the provisions of the Public Service Employment Act, as are some other public servants who are directly responsible to Parliament.

Since the press reports of this morning, I have looked at the relevant paragraphs of the annual report and I must say it appears to me that the report had been misinterpreted. Newspaper accounts refer to it as indicating that the merit system "is being abandoned" or is "on the way out". I have been able to find no statements of that kind in the report. What the report does is refer to what it says is a problem with regard to "equality of opportunity" for certain groups in the community to be fully represented in

the public service. It suggests that the answer to this problem "may be found in a dynamic concept of merit". As I read the report, it is not suggesting that merit be abandoned but rather that means be found of providing full and equal access for people in all groups to be considered for appointment on the basis of merit. In any event, it is apparent that there is some confusion and misunderstanding and it is important that this should be removed.

May I say, Mr. Speaker, that whatever the explanation or interpretation of the report may be, there is no doubt about the position of this government. It has stood squarely for the merit principle for appointment to the public service and that is the principle for which it continues to stand.

If it can be arranged among House leaders to have the report sent to a committee of the House for discussion without delay, the government is prepared to provide the necessary reference.

**Hon. Robert L. Stanfield (Leader of the Opposition):** Mr. Speaker, I assume that the Prime Minister's statement was hastily prepared as he has not followed his usual courteous practice of supplying the leaders of the opposition parties with copies before delivery. I must say that I welcome the statement which deals with an important subject. It is important to clarify the report of the Public Service Commission and to reassure the Canadian people as to the concepts the public service commissioners have in mind. I also welcome the Prime Minister's statement this afternoon that the government stands squarely behind the merit system in terms of appointments to and promotions within the public service. I believe that if confusion exists following the report of the Public Service Commission, and I believe it does, it was justified in view of the confusing rhetoric in the opening sections of the Public Service Commission report. For example—I will not take long—there is this statement:

Because the merit concept was originally designed to eliminate patronage, it has tended to develop a sacred cowishness of its own.

That statement of itself would tend to suggest to some people, at least, that the principle to some extent is being abandoned. Farther on the report says:

But the commission has been taking a longer look at the concept of merit in recent years.

It then talks about the excellent improvement in the public service that the application of the merit system has produced. The last statement I have quoted would also create the impression in the minds of many people that the concept of merit was in the process of substantial modification. Later the report says:

A growing feeling has been that the merit system in the past has been applied too narrowly and that equality of opportunity for these groups has been lacking.