

Point of Order—Mr. McGrath

● (1542)

POINT OF ORDER

MR. McGRATH—COMMITTEES MEETING WHILE HOUSE SITTING

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Mr. Speaker, before orders of the day are called, I want to raise a point of order which I hope will not overtax your seemingly infinite patience, because we have had a number of procedural points of order raised in the House in the last couple of days. I am sure this point of order will commend itself to Your Honour because of the difficult if not impossible position in which it places the House.

The next order of government business calls for the House to go into committee of the whole to consider Bill C-10. The problem I want to put before you, Mr. Speaker, arises from the fact that as of this moment, 3.30 this afternoon, we have meeting the following standing committees of the House:

The first is the Standing Committee on Finance, Trade and Economic Affairs. That committee happens to be dealing with a finance bill which is keeping the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chrétien) out of this House on a bill for which he has responsibility in this House, namely, Bill C-10, an act to amend the Income Tax Act with regard to family allowances. I could base my whole argument on that fact alone, but there are other committees meeting this afternoon as well.

There is the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration. A number of people on that committee, two for sure, have a special interest in Bill C-10 which the House is now considering in committee of the whole, but feel they have to be at that committee meeting this afternoon. As well, we have the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts meeting later this day, as well as the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I raise this at this time because the House will be dealing later today or on Thursday, as the case may be, in committee with amendments. This will tend to dramatize the dilemma in which the House finds itself.

First, there is the paradox of the House sitting in committee of the whole. That in itself would seem to exclude any other committees meeting at that time. When the House is in committee of the whole, that by definition seems to exclude any other meetings of committees of this House. The fact is there are committees of the House meeting today and will be meeting on Thursday while the House is in committee of the whole on a very important bill.

The problem is that when there are votes in committee of the whole there is no division bell. There is no way to alert members attending to their duties in committee that there are important votes taking place in the House. I submit this question should be of some importance to the government because the gap between the combined opposition and the government is closing as a result of the recent by-elections.

I have raised this matter before. I refer Your Honour to the *House of Commons Debates* for Monday, February 22, 1971, at page 3601. Apart altogether from the fact that we are

[Mr. Speaker.]

thwarted in our efforts to be able to direct questions to the Minister of Finance on an important bill dealing with the Income Tax Act because the minister is present at a meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance, there is the fact that members are precluded from attending to their duties in committee of the whole with respect to divisions that may take place, and probably will take place. I anticipate there will be amendments to this bill. Therefore this is a problem with which the Chair should certainly be seized.

I realize what is going through Your Honour's mind at the present time, that there is nothing in the standing orders to cover it. That happens to be the case. However, when we did away with the committee on supply and established standing committees of the House to deal with supply and legislation, that reduced the number of times the House was in committee of the whole. I do not believe it was envisaged at that time that committee of the whole would be competing with standing committees of the House either on questions of supply or on questions of legislation, as is the case we are faced with this afternoon. I leave that with Your Honour.

I raised this last night when we got on to this bill. The Standing Committee on Finance, Trade and Economic Affairs was meeting last night at a time when we were in committee of the whole on Bill C-10. That committee was hearing evidence from the Governor of the Bank of Canada and the Minister of Finance on another important finance bill. That placed the House of Commons in an impossible position, one which was never intended by the rules.

I submit with great deference that this is a situation where Your Honour should intervene. I leave it at that, and hopefully the Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Prime Minister and President of Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) will bring this to the attention of the government House leader and, if we are seized with the question on Thursday, Your Honour will be able to deal with it.

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the point being made by the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath). I think it is fair to point out that the meeting of the finance committee last night was requested by the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens), who at the same time decided to be in the House to accuse us of not having the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chrétien) here. Surely the opposition has a responsibility in this.

Mr. McGrath: The hon. member denied that last night.

Miss Bégin: The hon. member was here last night instead of, as he requested, at the meeting of the finance committee on which he is the critic for the Tory party.

I say to the hon. member for St. John's East that the Minister of Finance would be pleased to come here to participate in this debate. At the moment he is at the meeting of the finance committee. However, he spontaneously offered to be with us for all of this evening. That was rejected by the hon. member for York-Simcoe who said he could not be here tonight. There is no meeting of the finance committee tonight.