

which is to take away from members of the House the opportunity to look at the events of 1972, 1973 and 1974 in the office of the Department of the Solicitor General. If that is to be the case, it will be a grave injustice to the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles Caouette (Témiscamingue): I would add only a few comments, Mr. Speaker.

It is clear that we cannot accept the attitude of a minister who tries to shirk his responsibilities. In the House of Commons the opposition enjoys the acknowledged privilege to question the government about its administration and to see whether it is now trying to hide behind its responsibilities through royal inquiry commissions. We cannot endorse this kind of policy.

We certainly support the Leader of the Opposition in his motion to refer the whole matter to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, but there is a point I want to emphasize. A lot of questions on various subjects have been asked in this House before now and we already had several examples of the same kind with the solicitors general who came before the present Solicitor General. Even if it is our right to ask questions, it often happens that the answers are only half-truths.

I think that if we refer this matter to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, we should also find some way of compelling ministers to answer our questions honestly.

[*English*]

Mr. Stuart Leggatt (New Westminster): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if it might be of some assistance if I could direct Your Honour's attention to the questions that were asked on Friday and the reasons given for not providing answers to those questions.

If you will recall, sir, the questions dealt, first of all, with the information that had been provided at the ministerial level by the RCMP to the minister in respect of mail opening and thereby the statements that we have received. Next, they dealt with the question of whether the Privy Council office, not the RCMP, had initiated steps against a legally constituted political party in Canada, the Parti Québécois, and what evidence the Privy Council had to initiate those steps. I think those are both serious and important questions, neither of which deals directly with the RCMP security service. Clearly they deal with the question of ministerial responsibility, and surely that is the distinction that we must make in these kinds of questions.

I am sympathetic when the Solicitor General (Mr. Blais) says, "Do not comment on the quality of the evidence before the commission". All of us who have practised law are aware of the fact that we must not try to prejudice, if possible, matters before a court. But when those questions are specifically directed to ministers of the Crown in regard to their carrying out of their responsibilities, I submit they are clearly in order, and I submit that the refusal to answer is a violation of the privileges of every member of the House.

Privilege—Answers of Solicitor General

I am sensitive, of course, to the rules in *Beauchesne* which indicate that a minister is not obliged to answer a question in the House. But I would like to refer you to page 154, fourth edition, where *Beauchesne* says the following:

An answer to a question cannot be insisted upon, if the answer be refused by the minister on the ground of the public interest;

The question comes back to this: what is the public interest? I have not heard the issue of the public interest specifically raised by the minister as a defence for not answering these questions. Surely the public interest is that the inquiry not be prejudiced, and I can understand that kind of argument, but there is an overriding public interest that responsible questions to responsible ministers about their responsibilities in carrying out their functions must be permitted and, if they are not answered, the government has to pay the political cost of that kind of stonewalling.

To get back to the initial point, let me state that the questions did not deal with the RCMP; they dealt with the minister's responsibilities.

● (1502)

I am going to quote two parts of the terms of reference under which the McDonald inquiry is operating. Subsection (a) reads in part as follows:

—to inquire into the relevant policies and procedures that govern the activities of the RCMP in the discharge of its responsibility to protect the security of Canada;

Subsection (c) also deals with the policies and procedures governing the activities of the RCMP in the discharge of its responsibility to protect the security of Canada. The McDonald commission is not an inquiry into the conduct of this government or of its ministers. That is the job of this House, not the job of the royal commission, and I do not expect the royal commission to conduct that kind of inquiry. I agree that the terms of reference could be broad enough for the inquiry to look at some aspects of that, but the fundamental duty of members of parliament is to continue to ask these questions. We are not represented as political parties before that inquiry in any way. We are unable to ask questions in our own committees, and now we are being told that we cannot ask questions in this place if they apply to evidence.

I would like to refer again to questions asked and answers given on Friday. I must say that the award you recently received, Mr. Speaker, should really have been given to the Solicitor General because he has been skating around like you would not believe.

The hon. member for Northumberland-Durham (Mr. Lawrence) asked a question to follow up some questions I asked concerning whether the minister was going to advise himself. The hon. member said this:

Obviously, it is our responsibility to ask the minister these questions so that we can receive the truth in this House. Will the Solicitor General reconsider the rather inflexible attitude which he has just displayed, so that we can ask him these questions in the House about this important matter and not have to rely on what is happening in a judicial inquiry?