

Withholding of Grain Payments

it is reached, which will not occur in this session of Parliament. Rather, I think it should be set down some day for a debate under motions or at some point which is mutually acceptable. One of the reasons I feel we should have this debate is that it is the kind of motion which leads to a vote. The time has come when the House of Commons should be able to take a decision on the matter of whether or not the government has committed a misdemeanour in failing to carry out the provisions of the law.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Before I get into that I should like to say just a word which I am prompted to say because the President of the Privy Council also looked at the Oxford dictionary. The word "impeach" is not a light word. It means "to call in question, disparage, accuse of, find fault with, accuse of treason or other high crime before a competent tribunal." The word "impeachment" is defined as "calling in question, accusation and prosecution for treason."

I submit that when a motion is placed on the order paper by a responsible member of the House, using the word "impeachment" in relation to the activities of certain members of the cabinet, it should not just lie there. In fact it seems to me the ministers of the cabinet themselves should be insisting on finding an opportunity to have this matter discussed and clarified in one way or another. The motion is that serious and its implications are that extreme. I think that common sense and the ordinary rules which ought to apply to debate should permit an early discussion of this motion.

However, my main reason for contending that we should have a thorough debate of this matter arises from the basic nature of our parliamentary set-up. I refer to the responsibility of the government to Parliament. All the authorities speak of that not just in terms of responsibility to Parliament but, more specifically, responsibility to the House of Commons.

• (2:50 p.m.)

There are a number of citations in Beauchesne. I will not take the time to read them but just refer to them in passing. Citations 2, 67 and 76 point out that the superior power in the state is the House of Commons, that the government's responsibility is to the House of Commons, and that it is the House of Commons that should make the final decisions. One of those citations points out the strange situation that we are in now, that so long as the government can command the support of a majority of the House of Commons it can do anything and get away with it. We had a little bit of discussion on that the other night. But at least, Mr. Speaker, there ought to be an opportunity for the House to have this kind of discussion and to make the decision.

It is not good enough for the government to say that it was elected by the people and that the people will decide at the next election whether it should stay there. That approach strikes at the whole concept of responsible government, strikes at the whole concept of the importance of Parliament, of the importance of the House of Commons.

This issue has been around now for a long time. After all, it is 13 or 14 months since the government quit making

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

the payments required under the Temporary Wheat Reserves Act; in other words, it is clearly admitted that for 13 or 14 months the government has been breaking the law. In view of the fact that this is the situation, and in view of the fact that members of the House of Commons are complaining about it, I submit there should be an opportunity to have this kind of debate.

Your Honour might say that we had a debate last Thursday night for six and a half hours on a motion to adjourn under Standing Order 26. That is true. It was a pretty good debate. We did not get much of an answer from the minister, but in any case it was a pretty good debate. But how did it end? It ended with the House adjourning and no decision being taken.

We have had many questions put during the question period. We have had attempts at motions under Standing Order 43. I myself tried a question of privilege on September 13 and offered a motion that would seek to refer the whole matter to the Committee on Privileges and Elections. Your Honour did not find that my case that day qualified under the definition of parliamentary privilege. But in the meantime more days have gone by and the issue becomes more serious and more intense. With respect to the whole concept of the superiority of the House of Commons over the government, I believe this House of Commons should have the chance to say where it stands.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The motion of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) provides that kind of vehicle. I think that if I had been drafting it I might have drafted it differently. But let me say for it that although it carries serious implications, although it says so clearly that even the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen) should understand that the law has been broken, nevertheless it does not try to settle the issue finally. The motion merely asks the House of Commons to recognize that the issue is serious enough that a special committee ought to be set up to study it. Therefore I think that the basic argument to be used, in trying to persuade Your Honour to grant such a motion, is that it is a motion of a privileged character.

The whole right of the House of Commons to be superior to the government, the whole right of the House of Commons to be the body to which the government must be responsible is challenged by the actions the government is now taking. And I submit that we should have the chance to make a decision on that point.

The government may tell us that it has a majority in the House, and of course its majority will line up with it and it will be sustained. Well, that is for the members of the government party to answer for when they go to the people. But in the meantime let us keep alive the principle of responsible government, which means the responsibility of the government to Parliament, and particularly to the House of Commons.

The President of the Privy Council says that the hon. member for Peace River is just trying to get in a little dig or two before we debate Bill C-244 this afternoon, if indeed we do get to that bill. I submit, Sir, that even if Bill C-244 were passed this afternoon, even if we cleared all 16