

*Attendance of Ministers in House*

attend. My point is that here is a matter of urgent national importance involving imports of grain. It affects not only corn but other varieties of grain, yet no question can be put to the minister from Friday until the following Wednesday, at least. This situation could lead to a great deal of disturbance and uncertainty in markets affecting the livelihood of Canadian farmers.

Then again, by the time the minister returns, if he is not permitted to answer for a number of days, a great many developments may have taken place and the element of urgency may have gone. Indeed, it might be easier and faster to get an answer by placing a question on the order paper than by raising it in the house.

While I am on my feet there are one or two other items on which I should like to comment, since they were mentioned by the Solicitor General. The Solicitor General pointed out that a few years ago in the days of another government, not of his party, members of the other place took part in the administration and could not, therefore, answer questions in this house. I can only reply that I was a member of this house in 1954 when Hon. Mr. Marler was minister of transport and served in that capacity for a long time before the government of the day was able to find him a seat in this chamber.

The Solicitor General then told us it was not reasonable that 29 ministers should be required to be here every day when they might well be needed to attend to urgent government business elsewhere. No one would suggest that all ministers should be present every day. It was my understanding several years ago when the post of parliamentary secretary was created and, prior to that, when the position of parliamentary assistant was established, that hon. members so designated were appointed for the very purpose of answering questions in this house on behalf of their ministers when their ministers were engaged on business elsewhere. I pass this on for Your Honour's consideration.

**Mr. Steven Otto (York East):** I shall be very brief. If I say this change is unpopular with the opposition I may be right, but the question before Your Honour is not to decide whether it is popular, but whether it is an interference with privilege. If the opposition could point to a rule which says that all ministers shall be present in the house during the question period, then Your Honour might

[Mr. Nesbitt.]

have some justification for saying that it constitutes an interference with privilege. But there is no such rule.

Nor is there a rule that any minister must answer questions addressed to him. A question may be directed to a minister, but he need not answer it.

**Mr. Baldwin:** Don't tell us that.

**Mr. Otto:** In these two brief comments I have made I believe lie the answers to the motion which is proposed.

[Translation]

**Mr. Réal Caouette (Témiscamingue):** Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for York East (Mr. Otto), who has just resumed his seat, reminds us that nothing in our rules states that a minister must be in the house. In that case, could the hon. member also point out that no section in the standing orders makes it compulsory for a member to be in the house? A member might be in his office as well as a minister, but that is not the point.

The motion before us wants to refer this matter to the committee on procedure. Now, before this approach was introduced or imposed on us by the new Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) everyone had noticed that all the ministers were not necessarily in the house, but that when a minister was absent, his acting minister or his parliamentary secretary could answer questions.

Now, with the new rule, in the minister's absence, the whole department disappears. If the minister is not in the house but in his office in Ottawa, then his parliamentary secretary or the acting minister has the right to answer. Why do we not follow the same procedure as before? This would not require that all ministers be present at the same time. When a minister had to be away, outside the house, somebody else could answer us. But today, even though the Prime Minister has told us that the rules have not changed, I say that they have. What happens is that there is only one day in the week, on Wednesday, when we can ask questions of any minister. Even if a minister is not in the house, we are allowed to ask him questions, because he is supposed to be present, and in his absence, our questions will be answered by his parliamentary secretary or the acting minister.

But if the minister is absent on a day when he is allowed to be, the acting minister can sit in his place and stay as mute as a fish. Indeed, his parliamentary secretary can also stay as mute as a fish, while holding all the