

Oral Questions

Mr. Blais: Mr. Speaker, I fully agree with the position you have taken. There is one point I want to make. There has been an attempt by hon. members of the opposition who have spoken on this question of privilege to suggest that parliamentary secretaries in some way are conspiring to defeat the role of the opposition. Surely, in committees, as in the House of Commons, we are involved in an adversary contest. The government attempts to pass its estimates or its legislation, and the opposition resists or opposes.

Apparently the opposition is not satisfied with the effectiveness of its role in opposition. It is the right of hon. members to be dissatisfied with that role, but surely it is the right of government supporters, backbenchers or parliamentary secretaries, to debate or ask questions in the committees in the same way as members of the opposition. Their behaviour in that regard should not in any way be taken as a conspiracy to defeat the opposition. That is the whole purpose of this House and its committees, namely, to present legislation on the part of the government and to oppose it on the part of the opposition.

Parliamentary secretaries, as well as backbenchers, have an obligation to support the government in measures presented to this House or to committees. It should not be suggested that because they participate in that role they are frustrating the opposition in its attempt to oppose the government.

● (1520)

Mr. Hnatyshyn: Mr. Speaker, I am sorry that the hon. member for Nipissing has seen fit, in effect, to cast a reflection on your ruling in respect of the position of parliamentary secretaries when you clearly indicated that under the Standing Orders they ought not to direct questions to ministers during the course of the question period.

I contend that when the hon. member in fact says that the same rights flow to parliamentary secretaries under the Standing Orders, he is clearly incorrect in that contention. The fact is that I almost felt obliged to raise the question as a matter of privilege rather than a point of order, in that I felt the rights and privileges of members of this House in a particular instance this morning were affected by the parliamentary secretary in question, because rather than ask his questions in the parliamentary context of the House of Commons, he took the circuitous route of asking questions of his own minister in the committee structure.

I would refer Your Honour, in the consideration of this matter, to Standing Order 55 (1) which provides as follows:

The Standing Orders of the House shall be observed in committees of the whole House so far as may be applicable—

Then exceptions are stated with regard to the seconding of motions. In other words, I suggest, with great deference, that you as Speaker of the House, have an obligation to ensure that the rules of the House and the Standing Orders are applied fairly and properly with regard not only to the affairs of this House but also in reference to committee proceedings. I have mentioned the fact that almost a question of privilege arose by virtue of the incident this morning. I, personally, was affected as a member of the committee who wanted to examine the estimates.

The fact is that my privileges as a member to investigate and to question the minister were affected by the intervention of the parliamentary secretary who wanted to speak at the same time as me. I was excluded from getting on the list this morning by virtue of the fact that he was there. I would even question, for example, the right of a parliamentary secretary to ask a question of another minister, because it seems to me there is a special relationship between the ministry and a parliamentary secretary.

I take great exception to this practice, and I think Your Honour should be firm in respect of a parliamentary secretary asking questions of a minister of his own department and taking up the time of the committee when there is a time limit and when many members, including many backbenchers on the government side, want to participate and ask questions in the time that is available. In the committee system there is limited time. We have only ten minutes in which to ask questions. If the parliamentary secretaries continue to participate in these debates, it will very much affect the rights and privileges of each member of this House in representing his constituency as he feels he should and has the right to do.

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): Mr. Speaker, very briefly, I think I must refer to the legislation which created the role of parliamentary secretaries and what was said at that time, as well as what has been said by various Speakers along the way concerning their role. I think it would be superfluous to repeat what Your Honour said, to the effect that parliamentary secretaries have the right to ask questions except of their own ministers in this House. The same principle should apply in committees. After all, I think it heaps abuse upon abuse when one considers that often the parliamentary secretary is a substitute for his minister, as he should be, in a committee, and then the very next day or later in the same day he questions his own minister. I think this is a clear abuse of the role of parliamentary secretaries.

Regarding the other question which was put by the Chair and brought up is the matter raised by my colleague from Athabasca the other day as a question of privilege, I would, with respect, remind you, Mr. Speaker, that there does lie an appeal from the ruling of the chairman of the committee to the Chair itself; that is, from the chairman of the committee of the whole where the estimates are being considered and whether they should be brought back in when we are in committee of the whole on tax legislation. There the Chair not only has the right but must decide on the point of appeal. It must do it, also, on a question of privilege.

I pointed out the other day—I do not want to get into that argument again—that the chairman of a standing committee of this House will decide questions of order and the committee will be master with regard to order. There is an appeal on this question. But all through our Standing Orders there is a very clear distinction between a point of order and a question of privilege. My colleague the other day raised a question of privilege, and what my colleague today has raised is, I believe, a question of privilege. It is my humble and respectful submission to you, Mr. Speaker, that the responsibility lies strictly with Mr. Speaker on questions of privilege.