

Oral Questions

Governments have a moral obligation to fulfil their commitments, but governments have an obligation to undertake those commitments in a financially and legally responsible manner. The Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs has repeatedly assured the House that no formal or written documentation existed on this agreement at the relevant time period.

What I want to know from the Prime Minister is what are the guidelines in this government and in the previous government for senior officials, for cabinet and for cabinet ministers to undertake these kinds of financial obligations on behalf of Canadian taxpayers and how precisely are those criteria fulfilled in this case?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, this is an obligation that was committed to by the previous government to the premier of Quebec. It was discussed among the premiers in Charlottetown or Halifax at a time when there were laws in Alberta, in B.C. and another in Quebec about provincial referenda. There was a discussion at that time on whether there should be one national referendum or a series of provincial referenda.

The conclusion was that the premier of Alberta decided to join in the federal referendum. The premier of B.C. did the same thing. But Quebec did not. Mr. Harcourt made a public statement that he understood that if he proceeded with his own legislation he expected to receive some compensation. I was not there but I tried to find out from the participants what had happened to get the best proof I could.

• (1130)

It is not a question of having a contract or not having a contract. I said in the House that there was no documentation on it. That is why I was prudent. I tried to have good witnesses and that is what I have done. However, it is an obligation that was contracted by a previous government.

In fact the taxpayers have paid for the referendum in all other provinces but not in Quebec. It was making an argument about fairness and so on. When I had all the files in front of me and the discussions that my staff had with the people concerned, I did my best. When I had the complete file in front of me I acted.

That is the difficulty. As I said before there were no documents. That was the problem. But there was a commitment by the Prime Minister of Canada to certain premiers that I am respecting.

It is just like when I get up in the House and I am asked a question and I say I will do something, sometimes I have to act after I said that. But if a Prime Minister cannot deliver on his word, who can?

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West): Mr. Speaker, I have a supplementary question.

I hope the Prime Minister will agree that verbal commitments or verbal agreements made at dinner meetings, cocktail parties or on golf courses are not the proper way to conduct the business of the Government of Canada. This is an extremely dangerous route to go.

When the Prime Minister spoke to former Prime Minister Mulroney did he ask him whether there were any verbal agreements with various other parties, for example, with the Pearson consortium or the EH-101 contract? When he does do that, how much does he feel the taxpayers of Canada will be dinged for on those verbal commitments?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I explained to the House clearly what happened. I have nothing to add. There was an agreement between the Prime Minister of the day and the premier of Quebec that he would recommend a payment. He never proceeded with it, perhaps due to circumstances. I do not want to get involved with what happened in those days.

I said I was confronted with a problem and I tried to find the proof that was needed to justify the payment. The payment was made. If the hon. member says we should not have paid, that would be another argument. That is not what he is saying.

Rather than to pass judgment on the substance, he is trying to play on the process. I am saying that there was a commitment by the previous government and we respected that commitment.

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West): Mr. Speaker, I am asking precisely about the process. When these various subject matters go to the courts these things will be under examination.

I would like to know if the Prime Minister will table for the benefit of the House the guidelines that he will be using on past and future matters to ascertain whether cabinet and cabinet members have undertaken financial commitments on behalf of the Government of Canada?

For example, would the government be open to undertaking a request from the current Quebec government to pay for the next referendum? How would he handle such a request? What is the basis for a financial obligation on that matter?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, if it is a provincial referendum that is one thing. In this case, however, there was a national referendum where the same question was asked of all Canadians.

What we did was very easy. We divided the per capita costs of having a referendum in the rest of Canada and that is what we paid. If there is a provincial referendum in Alberta or B.C. or Nova Scotia or Quebec, they pay the bill. This is a democracy.