

*Points of Order*

the Minister. Nonetheless, there are reasons in this particular case why the Chair feels inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the Minister.

As the Minister pointed out to the House, divided constitutional jurisdiction and unresolved intergovernmental discussions and negotiations are involved in this issue. This would suggest that the Minister is not entirely at fault in these particular circumstances and that efforts are being made to address the committee's recommendations. Furthermore, the Minister did report back to the House within the specified period, albeit in a form not provided for in this standing order.

Having said that I would like, however, to remind all Hon. Members that government responses to committee reports are an important element of the reform process and one which the Chair feels should be respected.

The Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Birds Hill (Mr. Blaikie), a distinguished member of the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, in his intervention on this matter, made the point that having the Government make its position clear at a predetermined time with respect to the recommendations of particular committees is an essential ingredient of the reform process. He went on to argue that if technical responses became the habit in this place then the spirit of reform will have been lost. The Chair feels that there is considerable merit to this observation and reminds all Hon. Members of the need to make every effort to interpret our rules in as reasonable and as straightforward a way as possible.

*[Translation]*

The Chair wants to make another comment which was not made in the course of the debate. The Committee on Child Care was a special committee and, unlike a standing committee, it was dissolved after tabling its final report to the House, pursuant to the current practice. Committee Members, therefore, had no recourse other than raising the issue in the House. Although the rule does not provide for sanctions against Ministers who would choose to disregard these provisions, the Chair considers that breaching this rule with respect to a special committee report is more serious, for it might enable the Government to delay indefinitely its response to special committee reports.

*[English]*

The point of order raised by the Hon. Member for Mount Royal on the surface seems to be a similar case. But a close scrutiny of the issues demonstrated fundamental differences. First, the matter pertains to a standing committee of the House and not a special committee. Second, the Minister of Communications (Miss MacDonald) in tabling a response to the fifth and sixth reports of the Communications Committee was not offering to give an interim response but attempting to comply with the provisions of Standing Order 99(2). Third, the complaints of the Hon. Member for Mount Royal, the Hon. Member for Edmonton South (Mr. Edwards) and the

Hon. Member for Broadview—Greenwood (Ms. McDonald) revolve around the issue of the "lack of comprehensiveness" of the Minister's response.

The Hon. Member for Edmonton South, who is the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, eloquently summarized the frustration of the committee members and urged the Chair to reconsider an earlier ruling of June 29, 1987, when the Chair ruled that:

—the nature of the response must be left to the discretion of the Government. If Hon. Members are dissatisfied, there are other avenues available to them through which they can pursue the matter.

*[Translation]*

The Hon. Member for Edmonton South would know that the Chair is always reluctant to reconsider earlier rulings. Still I can elaborate on what I said in June by attempting to be more specific and providing an explanation which might be more useful in this case.

• (1130)

*[English]*

What I said on June 29, 1987, and what Mr. Speaker Bosley said on April 26, 1986, still applies to this case. It is not for the Chair to pronounce on the quality of the government response. The word "comprehensive" in the standing order is not without meaning, however. A simple yes or a curt no to all of a committee's recommendations could be a comprehensive response indeed. Neither response might be satisfactory, depending on one's point of view.

Under the new rules, and particularly Standing Order 96(2), standing committees now have extensive new powers and the Committee on Communications and Culture can pursue the matter of the quality of the Minister's response with her. I understand that that process has already begun.

The statute law, the programs and policy objectives, the expenditure plans, management and organization and operation of government departments are permanently and fully accessible to the committee. That is the other avenue to which I alluded on June 29, 1987. No longer do standing committee members need to raise in the House such issues and no longer do they need a specific House order to proceed. The proper place to raise these matters is in the committee which ultimately can use its power to report to the House if it feels its privileges have been offended.

The reform of the standing committees is an important and fundamental aspect of the renewal of our parliamentary system of Government. The principle of accountability has been enhanced to a degree never achieved before. Having been given such enlarged mandates, committees should proceed judiciously and responsibly. Standing Committee members should avoid raising disputes in the House unless a standing committee has reported that its business is being systematically frustrated and its privileges are consequently affected.