

Privilege—Mr. Lawrence

Northumberland-Durham (Mr. Lawrence) concerning what is a fundamental question of privilege.

It is my capacity and every member's capacity in this House not to represent ourselves but to represent our constituents. When we come to this place we assume an obligation to ask questions of a responsible government about matters that come before it from day to day, or matters that we may learn about that had come before it previously. The opposition cannot always know what occurred months ago. But when a ministry changes, surely it is a fundamental principle of this place that the minister is not responsible for what happened with regard to his predecessor. Surely it is fundamental to the practices and procedures of the British House of Commons that that minister should inform himself so our constituents can be informed as to the political responsibility for matters that have gone before.

● (1212)

The answers given to questions which I raised today, Mr. Speaker, are mindboggling concerning the conduct of business in this place. I have not had a chance to check the blues, so I am going to paraphrase the answer that was given, but I certainly came to the conclusion from the answer given that he will not comment on matters before the commission, and that he will not inform himself on matters that have occurred in the past with respect to his predecessor.

An hon. Member: Precisely.

Mr. Leggatt: That is the most dangerous kind of answer and I must say it is the most dangerous way for the new minister to assume his new responsibilities. Surely if that is the kind of left foot the minister is going to put forward, it would be best for him not to sign a lease for his office or purchase any new furniture because he will not be occupying it for long.

The minister must accept his responsibility to inform himself and advise members of this House as to the political accountability of his office, and that includes his predecessor. If he is unable to recognize his duty and obligations, I suggest that a ruling be made in this House as to his responsibility respecting our practices and procedures here in answering questions concerning activities which have occurred in the past.

This is a vital and important matter to the House. It could reduce the question period to a travesty, and if he continues to take that position, Mr. Speaker, I suggest he is degrading the parliamentary process to an incredible degree. I am not suggesting that you make a ruling on this now but perhaps you would like to have something in more detail with more research undertaken on the subject. I will be happy to provide that if I am given the opportunity.

Hon. J.-J. Blais (Solicitor General): Mr. Speaker, of course I am interested in the comments made by both hon. gentlemen opposite. They do indeed deal with very important subjects. However, I think there is evidently some misunderstanding on the part of the hon. gentlemen opposite.

[Mr. Leggatt.]

There are two aspects to this question. The first one is whether I am in any way obligated during the question period to reply to questions in any form they may be. As I understand the rules, there is no obligation on the part of Ministers of the Crown to reply to questions that are raised. Second is the question of my responsibilities to the portfolio that has been conferred upon me.

Mr. Hnatyshyn: To tell the truth.

Mr. Blais: I have indicated to the hon. gentlemen that I take those responsibilities very seriously and they indeed include actions that took place prior to my nomination. In terms of my own ministerial responsibilities relating to any actions they commence as of February 1, the date of my appointment. With regard to providing information to hon. members, I would have to analyse each and every question that was put prior to my nomination in order to ascertain whether the information can be provided.

The decision which I have made that I will not reply to questions relating to matters presently before the Royal Commission which has been set up by this government—

An hon. Member: Stonewalling.

Mr. Blais: —at the request of the opposition, Mr. Speaker—

An hon. Member: Let us do away with the House of Commons and democracy.

Mr. Blais: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): It is a pretty black day for you.

Mr. Blais: Mr. Speaker, I have listened very carefully and patiently to the hon. gentlemen. I wish they would offer me the same courtesy.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Blais: The McDonald inquiry is studying certain issues and matters within very wide terms of reference. It is for that commission to deal with those issues. At the request of the opposition the government set up that commission. I am not going to be led by the opposition to comment on a day-to-day basis on evidence which is adduced before that commission. It would be usurping the function of the commission if I qualified comments made before it respecting the validity or invalidity of one statement or the other. Surely that is part of the process of the investigation itself.

I will, of course, completely inform myself of the proceedings before the commission. Eventually, and I hope soon, there will be recommendations made by the commission, and decisions will be required by this government relating to those recommendations in order for us to take actions which will be incumbent upon us as a result of their conclusions. Until such time as a report is received from the commission, Mr. Speak-