

Privilege—Mr. Nielsen

switches in another part of the chamber becomes even more complicated. I suggest, however, that we ought not to dwell unnecessarily long on this point.

The question that was raised last week, on which the Speaker has already ruled, is now a matter of history, and has established a precedent that we will follow for some time to come, I hope. It at least has clarified any question that might have arisen as a result of last week's misunderstandings. I do not really see how it would be possible, short of the Speaker's being put in the position of having to identify individually who is required to answer, for the system to work any differently from how it now works.

I want to suggest that, on balance, it works very well. The people who operate the switches that turn the microphones on and off do so with a great deal of care, and they maintain an alertness that is to be complimented. I am a little concerned that, in spite of the fact that it is stressed that this is not be considered a criticism, it cannot be seen as other than a criticism, which in my judgment is unwarranted and unjustified.

We would all like to be recognized from time to time, and there are times when we are not when we feel we ought to have been; but that is the prerogative of the Chair, and as long as those who operate the microphones turn on the one they are supposed to turn on at the time the Speaker identifies which microphone is to be activated, then we have no complaint about the way in which they do their job and they ought not to be drawn into debate on the floor of the House.

Mr. Nielsen: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order because of some unwarranted remarks by the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain (Mr. Deans), who asserted just a moment ago that my remarks with respect to the conduct of the switchers cannot help but be seen as being critical. He has no right to question the word of an hon. member given in this House of Commons. When I preface my remarks by saying that I intend no criticism of the switchers, he must accept that, and I thought he would have had the good grace to do so.

In the meantime, I did send you a copy of a proposed motion should you decide that the whole question merits some consideration by a standing committee of the House representing the privileges of all members. It might commend itself, and I would not be at all averse to your Table advisers altering its wording, if that would make it more acceptable, to an examination in depth of this whole question which has never before been examined by a member's committee.

Madam Speaker: I will try to deal with this matter in as much detail as I can in answer to the problems that have been put forward by the hon. member. I happen to think that the introduction of the sound system in this House has not had a bad effect on the traditional equality of members in terms of their right to express themselves. As a matter of fact, I believe that the introduction of these electronic devices has been done quite well, and I might add has been done through the co-operation of all parties in this House and with the help of those members of the different parties who had been delegated

to the special committee that studied the whole matter of introducing broadcasting in the House of Commons. They should be commended for the way they have allowed us to introduce broadcasting in this House, because the system in my view, and in the view of many people who have come to visit our country, is working quite well. We have succeeded in giving an electronic interpretation to the application of the Standing Orders and the manner in which the electronic devices are activated in order to reflect what our rules really mean. It still remains in this House that the only way for a member to be given the floor is to be recognized by the Speaker.

● (1540)

The microphones are only activated when the Speaker recognizes a member by the name of his constituency. That remains the only way to be recognized in the House. It has nothing to do with the matter of a microphone in front of a member being open or not.

The hon. member is arguing that because microphones in front of a member are sometimes activated he might be compelled to speak, and therefore being compelled to speak he would automatically have the right to speak. But unless the Speaker gives him the floor and gives him the right to speak, he does not have that right.

Another way in which the Speaker might give someone the right to speak is to act negatively. That is to say, during question period, where I do not normally recognize a minister to answer a specific question, if the Chair feels that a question does not relate to a minister's departmental business, the Speaker would intervene and not allow that minister to answer the question. A member should not feel that he automatically has the floor because the microphones are open in front of him. For instance, the other day an hon. member was seeking the floor and because I had not yet recognized him the microphone had not been activated. Therefore, he was not able to be heard in the House. In a case where a member would begin to speak solely because he had the microphone open in front of him, the Speaker would intervene in order to restore order in that situation.

The Speaker has perfect control of those switches, I might add. Perhaps this is a technical detail which some hon. members are not aware of, but I have two buttons on my chair. One button switches my microphone on. If I were trying to bring order to the House and could not be heard and for some reason or other the console operator could not activate my microphone, I have the possibility of putting my own microphone on. I have another button which completely controls the sound and shuts it off if an hon. member who was speaking in my view did not have the right to speak at that particular time. So despite the fact that the hon. member for Yukon is arguing that the operator of the console may have certain discretion in activating one microphone or another, I have the ultimate discretion. The control of who has the floor in the House has remained entirely in the hands of the Speaker, which I believe is a clever interpretation on the part of those members who