

Privilege—Mr. J. Turner

There is a suggestion that even if they have not, their firms get some kind of advantage because of the earlier information which they have and some other firms do not have. That may or may not be the case. I will consider it carefully, but it may not go to the question of privilege at all.

The Hon. Member for Montreal—Sainte-Marie may wish to clarify this, and I would ask him to do so as quickly as possible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Malépart: Mr. Speaker, I should like to reassure the Minister by saying that maybe the interpretation—or maybe I was not very clear: I never meant to blame these 20 people; I simply wanted to explain, and I am sure the Minister will concur, that the public will feel it is in its interest to do business with someone who appears to have the upperhand a head start. I am blaming those 20 people, but I do blame the Minister who is guilty of creating the impression that those 20 people have a privileged status above the Leader of the Opposition, other Members of the House and even Ministers. It is the Minister who is to blame, not the 20 people.

• (1630)

[*English*]

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, I have been following the comments made this afternoon. Understanding the importance of the question of privilege that has been raised, I must admit to the fact that I am perplexed by the contributions of many Hon. Members sitting opposite. I say that because, from the outset, they have questioned whether or not there should be any consultation involved in the preparation of this White Paper. Indeed, that has been the basis on which they have laid their arguments, skate around it as they might.

If Hon. Members had been listening for the last number of weeks and months to the intent of the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson), who will be presenting the White Paper on tax reform, they would have known that he was consulting widely, and he has re-emphasized that day after day. He has been consulting with farm groups, with labour organizations, with business groups, with women's groups, with social groups and with groups right across the board. He has been dealing with these people so that the process will be better informed than it has been in the past.

The method of consultation is a two-way street. It benefits the Minister of Finance and his officials in their undertakings and it benefits those who will be most affected by tax reform policy. That is the one thing that he has been saying.

He has also made it clear today and on other occasions that the Department of Finance would draw on experts from the community involved with tax policy, including accountants and tax lawyers, in order to better inform the process within the Department. That is what has been occurring over a number of weeks and indeed months.

Experts have been sworn under oath to work with the Department in the preparation of this material. The question arises, has that given them any kind of special advantage? Obviously if we are to say that there should never be experts attached in any way to the Department of Finance or indeed any other Department when preparing policy, then we are saying that all the answers reside solely within this Chamber or solely within the expertise that can be offered by officials. We have not seen the situation that way.

We know that in the past, tax reform policy has been presented to the House inadequately studied, inadequately researched and inadequately informed by expertise. In fact, a previous Minister of Finance, having introduced tax reform policy in the House just a few years ago, made so many mistakes in the way he went about it that he set the whole question of tax reform back by many years. Canadian people were the ones who suffered as a result of that.

The Minister of Finance has explained clearly that there has been use of experts in the field who have been under oath. These experts have honoured that oath and there is nothing more to it than that. It might be that members of the Opposition do not want to see that process carried on, but they should be honest enough to say so and not try to impugn the characters, integrity or motives of people involved in this process.

The Hon. Member for Windsor West (Mr. Gray) asked whether or not this process could be skewed somehow or other by the introduction of a Ways and Means motion. He has been in this House long enough to know that Ways and Means motions are introduced a good many other times than at budget time and because a Ways and Means Motion is introduced, that does not automatically signal that whatever then happens is a budgetary process.

Mr. Simon de Jong (Regina East): Mr. Speaker, I will try not to be too long. I believe the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson), and the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Turner) as well, touched on one of the central points here. The question is not whether people broke their oaths, the question surely is whether some people, advertently or inadvertently, are in an advantaged position.

The tradition for the secrecy surrounding budgets is based upon the notion that no individual should be in an advantaged position, that the knowledge that might be gained from a budget or related documents before those documents are made public would put them in an advantaged position. Through the years, a tradition has arisen whereby there is the utmost secrecy surrounding the budget so that no individual would be put in an advantaged position. Whether an individual takes advantage of that position or not is a second matter.

Throughout the years, Ministers of Finance have had to resign when inadvertently aspects of budgets became public or known to a few unauthorized people. We are dealing with a most serious situation.

Twenty individuals who are highly knowledgeable in the field of taxation have, over some months, been in constant