

# HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, May 10, 1972

The House met at 2 p.m.

## PRIVILEGE

### MR. BURTON—DELAY IN APPEARANCE OF MINISTER OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC EXPANSION BEFORE STANDING COMMITTEE

**Mr. John Burton (Regina East):** Mr. Speaker, I wish to raise a question of privilege concerning the failure of the Minister of Regional Economic Expansion to make himself available at reasonable times to appear before the Standing Committee on Regional Development, despite assurances to the House and the committee, to answer questions concerning the apparent failure of the minister to comply with section 16 of the Regional Development Incentives Act and the manner in which delays in appearances by the minister are preventing the committee from carrying out its responsibility to examine the estimates of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion.

The facts are as follows. Section 16 of the Regional Development Incentives Act states:

The Minister shall, within 40 days after the 6th day of August, 1969 and monthly thereafter, or, if parliament is not then sitting, on any of the first days thereafter that parliament is sitting, submit to parliament a report respecting the administration of this Act.

The Minister of Regional Economic Expansion gave his interpretation of his statutory obligations in the House and in the standing committee on June 6 and June 16, 1969, and also on February 28 and 29 and on April 27, 1972. These statements made it clear that the minister undertook to give accurate and up-to-date information on grants under the Regional Development Incentives Act.

On April 27, the minister promised the Standing Committee on Regional Development to clarify as soon as possible the issue of a grant of \$6.1 million to McCain Foods Limited, a grant which was not reported to parliament. On the same date the minister agreed to attend before the committee again at the earliest opportunity, possibly on May 5. Since that time the committee was informed that the minister was not available on May 5 and that his next appearance would be on May 18. Subsequently, that date was changed to May 17, and yesterday the chairman of the standing committee informed the members that this date had been altered to May 24. A relevant factor to be considered by members of the committee is the real possibility that the House may be dissolved before that date. Thus, the minister may not appear before the standing committee at all. It is apparent that at least in one case involving a grant of \$6.1 million section 16 of the Regional Development Incentives Act has been breached. It is clear that for some reason the minister finds it inconvenient to clarify the issue before the proper forum, namely, the standing committee, as soon as possible.

• (1410)

Another question must also be considered. I submit that the instance just mentioned raises the probability that the minister has failed to report to the House as required by law other grants involving considerable sums of public funds. Only the minister can deal with these matters and some members of the committee have pressed for further appearances by the minister last week and this week at committee and subcommittee meetings.

It should also be noted that under the rules of the House the estimates are referred to committees for examination. Under the rules estimates must be reported back to the House before May 31 regardless of the stage of consideration. If a minister is unwilling to appear before the committee at reasonable times and on a sufficient number of occasions, it is impossible for the members of the committee to carry out their responsibilities in examining spending estimates before they are voted on by parliament. If such examination is thwarted it strikes at the heart of parliamentary institutions and infringes on the rights of members. If Your Honour finds that I do have a question of privilege, I am prepared to move the following motion, seconded by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles):

That the question of ministerial appearances before standing committees during consideration of spending estimates be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections for study and report thereon and that the committee give particular study to apparent delays by the Minister of Regional Economic Expansion in making further appearances before the committee.

**Mr. Speaker:** The hon. member for Regina East has given the Chair notice of his intention to raise the matter to which he has alluded by way of a question of privilege. The hon. member knows, as I am sure the House does, that the question of ministerial appearances before committees of the House is as old as confederation, actually as old as parliament, certainly going back longer than 100 years.

What the hon. member is bringing before the House at this time and what he would like the House to consider further, either directly or through one of its other committees, is certain proceedings of a committee. There is a long established rule and it is the tradition of the House that matters before a committee are dealt with by that committee, and if any difficulty arises during the course of the proceedings of any hearings held by the committee this should be indicated either in the committee's report or in the course of debate in the House on the report submitted by the chairman of the committee on behalf of its members.

There is also an alternative aspect to this matter. The hon. member seems to put in question the conduct of the minister in relation to the administration of his department or the application of his statutory obligations. Obvi-