

Privilege—Mr. McGrath

As the hon. member for Yukon and the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) have pointed out, search and rescue affects all of Canada. If the statement were made here in the House, the people affected would know much sooner the implications and the details of the policy change. To reiterate the point made by the hon. member for Yukon, the making of statements of this kind outside the House denies members the opportunity to fulfil our obligations as representatives of the people. When a minister of the government chooses—and I suggest in the present case it is deliberate—to make a statement of this nature outside the House, then it does in fact affect my privileges as a member as well as my ability to function as a representative of my constituents.

Mr. John C. Crosbie (St. John's West): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the statement made by the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) on this question of privilege. Although I have only been a member of this House since November 1, as I conceive the situation I have the same rights and privileges as any other hon. member.

It is off the coast of St. John's West where the incidents occurred in the last 11 months to cause the government to change its policy regarding search and rescue in eastern Canada. At least, I believe the government is going to change its policy. It should be on the record of this House that at least the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Danson) has indicated he will send the hon. member for St. John's East a copy of the statement he is to make at eight o'clock tonight in Gander.

I should like to remind hon. members of the *San Juan* and *Gabrielle* disasters, as well as a number of other events that occurred this year off the coast of Newfoundland. The people are very upset about the situation, yet the government has not even had the courtesy to tell this hon. member that the minister intends to make a statement in Gander tonight at 8 p.m., or to make available a copy of the statement.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that you have to consider and decide on the technical matter of whether there is a breach of members' privileges. Many observers of the parliamentary scene over the last 20 years are suggesting that parliament is becoming more and more irrelevant. I submit to hon. members that it is becoming more and more irrelevant as a result of ministers—who are really only members of the House, although they also have cabinet positions—treating the House and its members with contempt. The Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang) who spoke on this question of privilege a few minutes ago has now left the House before the question of privilege has even been decided upon.

Mr. McGrath: How is that for contempt?

Mr. Crosbie: How is that for arrogance and contempt? The Minister of National Defence is going to drop into Gander this evening to make a statement on the government's policy in respect of a new search and rescue operation in Newfoundland, yet he has not indicated to members from Newfoundland what the statement contains. I suggest this does affect members of the House. I know that privilege is a technical matter,

[Mr. Forrestall.]

Mr. Speaker, but surely the House, its members and the people of Canada have to be taken more seriously by members of the government.

Whether or not you make a technical ruling in favour of this matter, Mr. Speaker, this proposed statement involves one of the most important questions affecting eastern Canada and Newfoundland, and it was the subject matter of a lot of debate and a major issue during the by-election in St. John's West. The minister says an announcement is to be made in Gander, and the excuse is that the government wants to give the Newfoundland press a chance to cover the matter. The press gallery here in Ottawa is jam-packed with press people who send their material back to Newfoundland, to eastern Canada in general and throughout the country.

The minister is skulking and sneaking down there like a thief in the night. He is on his way to Cyprus, but he is going to drop down into Newfoundland and make this announcement in Gander. That shows you how important it is: he is going to break his trip to Cyprus. I don't know whether he is going to Cyprus to pick up a Cypriot nanny, or why he is going there, Mr. Speaker, but this is a terrible situation—

Some hon. Members: Order.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for St. John's West (Mr. Crosbie) was really doing very well on the question of privilege up to that point. I do not want to interrupt him, but I do think he should get back to the subject.

Mr. Crosbie: I retract that statement, Mr. Speaker. In finishing, let me say that I am only a new member—

An hon. Member: With a lot to learn.

Mr. Crosbie: I have a lot to learn, as well as hon. gentlemen opposite. They will learn an awful lesson when the next election comes. Let me end with this statement as a new member, Mr. Speaker. I know the Speaker may have to break some new ground in deciding that this matter should go to the committee, but surely he can make a ruling which would enlarge a bit the privileges of the House of Commons so that we might bring to the attention of ministers the fact that they are members, too, and are not gods, and that the rest of us deserve some consideration.

● (1540)

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I do not propose to entertain any further discussion on the matter. Hon. members will know, since reference has been made to them in this matter, that the precedents are very clear. The reason of course, for the difficulty in attempting to move in the direction that has been suggested by all those who participated in this question of privilege, that is to say, some requirement that the minister make a statement in the House rather than make it anywhere else, is that the basis for that is obviously thin. There is the difficulty not only of defining what kind of statements would be required to be made in the House, but in addition to that