

Privilege—Mr. W. Baker

privilege when complaints were made earlier today. If, as a result of all that, because of the irresponsible, thoughtless and child-like attitude of the opposition members, one or several journalists violated their agreement with the government, we are not to blame. Once again, if you feel this is indeed a question of privilege, then it is up to the journalist or journalists concerned to settle their accounts with the hon. members of the opposition who made him fall into that trap.

[English]

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Dufferin-Simcoe): Madam Speaker, the matter we are dealing with is far more serious than the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) would have us believe—

Mr. Knowles: The President of the Privy Council.

Mr. Beatty: Your ruling earlier did not suggest that the government had no responsibility to ensure security over the estimates.

● (1740)

The question of privilege that you ruled on earlier was raised by a member on this side, by my deskmate, the hon. member for Capilano (Mr. Huntington). It dealt with one matter alone, whether the privileges of Members of Parliament had been breached by their not being allowed into the lock-up that was held for the press. That is what you ruled on.

The question of privilege raised by the House leader for the Official Opposition is very different. What we find now is that as a result of the decision of the President of the Treasury Board, Members of Parliament have been denied the opportunity of gaining information about these estimates directly. However, Canadians from coast to coast, if they had access to the CP wire, have been informed of the contents of these estimates in considerable detail prior to Parliament being officially informed.

I gather that my colleague, the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker), will be sending you a copy of the CP wire story, but to give you some indication of how long ago this leak took place, you will notice on the top it says, "Advance for release by wire, possibly about 3.45 p.m. EST today." That means that for about two hours now this information has been available to people who have CP wires.

The argument would be made by government members that because there was a reference to possible release around 3.45, the embargo was respected; but, in fact, any Canadian who had access to the CP wire would have access to this information. For example, this copy is off the teletype in PC research. What we have is the ludicrous situation where members of Parliament on this side of the House were specifically denied, because of the decision by the President of the Treasury Board the opportunity to gain advance information about the estimates on the grounds that there was a lot of fear, that security had to be respected, and yet we could learn about it through the CP wire which printed it out in PC research headquarters. Surely this underlines—

An hon. Member: Sit down.

Madam Speaker: I would have to warn the hon. member not to link these two questions. First of all, I ruled on the first one. They are not necessarily linked. At any rate, the member cannot refer to a ruling I have already made. But I will hear him on that particular question of privilege. I am interested in hearing his arguments.

Mr. Beatty: Gladly, Madam Speaker, I am simply indicating why the government House leader's misinterpretation of your ruling was so very unfair; and why it is that Members of Parliament, if there is to be an embargo, find themselves left in a very difficult situation if, indeed, the embargo applied only to Members of Parliament, and if the embargo cannot be made to stick.

Surely there is a purpose for the lock-up that was held. It is referred to as a lock-up. The government House leader referred to it as a lock-up; the President of the Treasury Board referred to it as a lock-up.

Presumably, the reason there was lock-up was that the government felt the government's interest would not be served by having premature release of this information. They felt they had responsibility, as they do under the precedents in this House, to table those estimates in Parliament first, before they are made publicly available. Yet what we find here is that it has been made available from coast to coast in Canada prior to being made available to Parliament. There has been no official tabling of those estimates in Parliament despite the fact that Canadians, from one coast to another, now have access to this information.

As my colleague the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton, pointed out, on the west coast the stock exchange is still open. Those Canadians, for example, are interested in defence industry stocks. You might very well have noticed the reference in the CP wire story to increases in defence spending for tanks, planes, and other items.

If it is nonsense, and if it is not a matter of concern to this House, why was there an embargo on us in the first place? If there was not any damage that could be inflicted upon the public interest by premature release, why was there a lock-up, and why were Members of Parliament told they could not have access to this information?

There has been a grave abridgement of the privileges of the House of Commons. I think, Madam Speaker, you have no choice but to rule that there is a *prima facie* question of privilege, and that this matter should be sent to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. I feel that the President of the Treasury Board is responsible for actions taken by his officials. He is responsible for the security of this information, just as the Minister of Finance (Mr. MacEachen) is responsible for the security of the federal budget. If there was a leak about the federal budget from any source, there would be no question but that the Minister of Finance would be forced to resign. There is adequate precedent for that.

This minister is responsible for security of his estimates. That security has been breached. This minister has a responsibility to tender his resignation.