

Privilege—Mr. Holtmann

I think that is a wonderful objective.

As the spokesman on aboriginal issues for the New Democratic Party, I have and continue to hold the view that partisan concerns and parochial attitudes do nothing to further the cause of Canada's first people.

He went on to say:

Yesterday the Indian, Inuit and Métis people of Canada were reminded again of that truism. In an anonymous office tower, behind closed doors and safely tucked away from probing microphones, four Members of Parliament abrogated their responsibilities to aboriginal people. In a recorded vote,—

Which was also an *in camera* session.

—the Hon. Member for Selkirk—Interlake (Mr. Holtmann), the Hon. Member for Timiskaming (Mr. MacDougall), the Hon. Member for Erie (Mr. Fretz) and the Hon. Member for Mackenzie (Mr. Scowen) voted to block the report—

I consider that to be a blatant violation of the rules and regulations by which this House governs itself. It is said that ignorance of the law is no excuse, and I point out that I think the Hon. Member has had ample opportunity to find out how the rules are applied.

The Chair must consider the damage which such actions can cause, not only now but in the future, if this is allowed to continue. I base my premise on the fact that it can be very damaging to Members because obviously *in camera* sessions are held from time to time for very obvious reasons.

I bring this to your attention, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you for hearing me on my question of privilege. I look forward to debate on this matter.

Mr. John Parry (Kenora—Rainy River): Mr. Speaker, in responding today to the question of privilege raised by the Hon. Member for Selkirk—Interlake, (Mr. Holtmann) I would first like to state that my defence to the Question of Privilege he raises is based on the belief that the vote I reported to the House was, *de jure*, not taken in an *in camera* session and that the actions of that Member and other Members of the Progressive Conservative Party, who were present at that meeting, had in essence obviated, annulled and rendered void the original notice of meeting for an *in camera* session.

I would like to refer to the spirit, and some of the text, of the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons. This particular topic is not covered in detail in that report. However, it is clear from this report that it is intended that Members of Parliament shall be granted sufficient power and freedom of action to represent fairly their constituents. I cite from page 2:

Private members must once again become instruments through which citizens can contribute to shaping the laws under which they live . . . If the private member is to count for anything, there must be a relationship between what the private member and the institution of Parliament can do and what the electorate thinks or expects can be done.

I would like to quote from the record of the hearings which led up to the meeting which is mentioned in the Question of Privilege of my hon. colleague. I would like to quote in order to demonstrate how the aboriginal leadership of Canada expected and anticipated in appearances before this standing committee, in that series of hearings, that there would be a report made on the question of aboriginal self-government. I quote from the proceedings of March 3:

The Assembly of First Nations would like this committee to prepare a brief but hard-hitting report to Parliament aimed at urging the federal and provincial governments, going into the First Ministers' Conference on March 26 and 27, to recognize our inherent or pre-existing aboriginal treaty rights to self-government.

That is testimony by Gordon Peters, the Ontario Regional Vice Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and the record shows that the Hon. Member for Selkirk—Interlake was present at that hearing.

A week later, Mr. Louis Bruyere, President of the Native Council of Canada, said:

So what can you do? First of all you can send a message, you can take into account what I said and what the ICNI, and AFN, the International Council and other groups you are meeting with say. You can issue a strong report on the matter before the gavel falls on the First Ministers' Conference 1987. You can indicate that Parliament has a independent non-partisan and national and international role in this great endeavour.

A similar request was later made by Mr. John Amagoalik of the Inuit Committee on National Issues. Therefore, I believe that it is quite clear to anyone who attended those sessions, and to anyone reading the record, that the democratically elected leadership of the aboriginal people of Canada expected the committee to act and to act before the First Ministers' Conference in order that the lengthy deliberations of that committee had some value.

You, Mr. Speaker, and I believe all Hon. Members of this House, must realize that if public expectations are not met directly, they must at least be accounted for. As my Party's aboriginal affairs critic, I have to answer telephone calls and letters from aboriginal leaders, from private citizens and from the media, all asking why the committee did not report before the First Ministers' Conference.

The courts of law in this land live by an adage which Parliament should respect, namely, that justice must not only be done but should be seen to be done. How in a democracy can we withhold public information which is essential to the good government principle? I know full well that for reasons of national security, or the protection of witnesses or innocent Canadians, we have a responsibility to protect them, but we also have a responsibility, I believe, to respond in a case where a committee abrogates its responsibility.

The record clearly shows that I did not violate the intent of the *in camera* session. I and members of my office staff were asked for copies of the draft committee report. Despite the circumstances, we categorically refused these, as we should. However, when a vote is recorded and the public is demanding an explanation, I feel that an explanation has to be forthcoming.

What, after all, did committee members expect when they agreed to a committee recorded vote? Did they believe that a recorded vote, becoming part of the record, is then something which can be consigned into anonymity indefinitely until a committee chooses to make the report? If they truly wanted their opinions to be kept secret they should simply have rejected the notion of a recorded vote or, better still, ask for the original notice for that meeting to have been withdrawn.