

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, May 29, 1973

The House met at 2 p.m.

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USE OF UNPARLIAMENTARY LANGUAGE—STATEMENT BY MR. SPEAKER

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members will recall, I am sure, the procedural difficulties in which the House became involved yesterday when a charge was made by the hon. member for Gander-Twillingate against the Minister of the Environment and Fisheries. The Chair intervened to suggest that the words used by the hon. member were unparliamentary. A discussion ensued as to whether the rule could apply where the charge relates to conduct or statements made outside the chamber. I appreciate that the distinction was proposed constructively with a view to being of assistance both to the hon. member and to the Chair.

On reflection, I find it difficult to agree with the proposition that so-called unparliamentary language would be irregular when it refers to the conduct or statements of members inside the House but that the same so-called unparliamentary language would be acceptable when relating to events outside the chamber. Hon. members, I am sure, will want to agree with the Chair when I suggest that unparliamentary language is just that, and requires the intervention of the Chair in accordance with the long established practice of this House. I will not burden the House with a long list of citations or precedents. I simply remind the House of Standing Order 35 which is to the effect that no member shall use offensive words against either House or against any member thereof. I refer also to Citation 155, paragraph 3, of Beauchesne's Fourth Edition, as follows:

No Member can be allowed . . . to tell a Member that he went about the country telling palpable lies.

This particular citation is referred to in connection with the suggestion that the hon. member's words might not be unparliamentary in that they had reference to statements made outside the House.

Having made these comments, I wish to assure the House that I do not want to dramatize the situation. I realize that members participate in debate in the House under considerable pressure and stress. I consider it to be the duty of the Chair to take this into account. It is easy and, indeed, sometimes natural for members to use words or expressions which, while they may honestly express one's feelings, may perhaps go beyond the limits of parliamentary propriety. Repeating a suggestion which I made yesterday, it seems to me that it should be possible for members to express strong views and to oppose other members vigorously without using offensive expressions which, by long-established practice and tradition and by

the common consent of members, are not acceptable in debate.

These rules and practices are established by the members themselves. They can be changed when it is felt that they are no longer relevant to the times. Such changes are accomplished by the House itself following debate either in the House or in committee. If members feel that the rules relating to the use of so-called unparliamentary language should be altered or that we should change the much-disputed rule that no question should be asked of a minister during the question period in relation to statements he has made outside the House, then it is up to the members themselves to make these changes. In the meantime the rules are there for members to observe. There is no way, I suggest, that the Chair can enforce these rules without the full co-operation of members, and I do not mean only the majority of members but every single member of the House of Commons.

● (1410)

I have always felt deeply indebted to the members of this House who in similar difficult positions in the past have made it possible for this type of procedural difficulty to be cleared up without dramatic confrontations. I am hopeful that, with the continuing assistance and, indeed, with the guidance of the House, it might be possible to soothe hurt feelings and restore a feeling of harmony between aggrieved members and proceed happily to the business of the House.

I think it would be unfortunate if this whole matter were resolved in a climate of emotional tension. I am prepared to leave the matter in abeyance for today in the hope that sweet reason will prevail, while at the same time reserving the proprieties of debate which are essential to the reasonable and orderly conduct of parliamentary business. In other words, I am prepared to make a distinction between the two aspects of this matter.

The first deals with ministerial statements made outside the House and reference to such statements. I myself have had serious doubts about this rule, and I think the hon. member for Gander-Twillingate and the right hon. member for Prince Albert had a point when they said that this rule should be reviewed. The hon. member for Peace River suggested yesterday that perhaps this is a question that might be referred to the committee.

Then there is the second aspect, which is perhaps not as important as the matter of substance, that is, the use of unparliamentary language. As I have said, it is important that no decisions should be made in the House by the Chair, by individual members or by the House in general on an emotional basis. I think that yesterday, and perhaps even today, we are still under considerable stress in relation to this very serious and contentious issue.