

standing committees and has limited our ability to direct questions effectively in this House since we do not know which minister is responsible for that very important and sometimes controversial agency of the Government of Canada.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Dufferin-Simcoe): Madam Speaker, I had hoped during the question period—and I understand that the demands of time was the reason it was not possible to be recognized—to clear this matter up by asking the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) whether in fact he had sacked the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) as the minister responsible for Statistics Canada and, if so, why he felt that he was inappropriate in that responsibility.

I would like simply to supplement the remarks made by my leader because I think the House has been gravely mistreated in this instance. According to the CP report which went over the wire yesterday:

Information director David Davidson said Blais assumed the responsibility Friday and that Johnston had said in a letter to the statistics agency's employees that Johnston had known when he was appointed his post would be temporary.

If indeed it is true that the Prime Minister had told the President of the Treasury Board that that responsibility would be removed from him at the time he was appointed, then the Prime Minister and the President of the Treasury Board had the responsibility to level with the Canadian people and the House of Commons. Instead, we learned about this announcement through a dispatch in the Canadian Press. The fact that no clear announcement had been made and that the government, for some reason, decided to make the change on a Friday, which they knew was slowest possible news day on which it would get the least possible coverage, certainly indicates that there are many questions here which remain to be answered and that the government has not discharged its responsibilities to Parliament and the Canadian people in terms of giving us the reasons for this very important change.

[*Translation*]

Hon. J.-J. Blais (Minister of Supply and Services): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to indicate to the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) and to the previous speaker that contrary to what they have said, the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) and, in fact, the public at large were very much aware of the fact that responsibility for Statistics Canada had been entrusted to me by the Prime Minister and that yesterday afternoon, I advised Madam Speaker as well as the chairman of the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates that since I had been notified only on Monday that these new responsibilities were entrusted to me, I could not appear before the committee.

Of course, the Leader of the Opposition knows full well that during any oral questions period, he could—in fact, he could have taken the opportunity today since this change has been publicly announced today and I had in fact talked about it yesterday with the chairman of the Standing Committee on

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Miscellaneous Estimates—he could seize the first opportunity during oral question period to address himself directly to the Prime Minister who is responsible for public administration and for delineating ministerial responsibilities. He did not take this opportunity, rather he elected to raise this through a question of privilege without any basis to do so, at a time when the Prime Minister was gone, when the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) was gone, in order to try to make a bit of a show off—

Mr. Ouellet: Petty politics!

Mr. Blais:—and petty politics, as the hon. minister puts it, without any legitimate ground.

[*English*]

From my standpoint, Madam Speaker, I might indicate to you that I am most pleased that the Prime Minister has asked me to take on this responsibility. It is only fitting that Statistics Canada, which is an administrative agency, should fit within an administrative department. It is a service organization, and those services for which I am responsible to the House are basically service agencies and administrative departments. I look forward to replying to questions from the opposition and from members on this side of the House relating to the discharge of my responsibilities with reference to Statistics Canada, and also to show up the excellence of that agency and to advise the House of the measures that will be undertaken within Statistics Canada to continue to make it one of the best statistical institutions, not only in Canada but indeed in the international arena.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Sinclair Stevens (York-Peel): Madam Speaker, I did not intend to speak on the point of order raised by the right hon. Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Clark), but I must try to clear the air, having heard the Minister of Supply and Services (Mr. Blais) imply that somehow it was our obligation to announce this change to the public of Canada. Surely it is up to the government to disclose in the appropriate way—which would have been a statement on motions yesterday—that a change has been made in ministerial responsibility for Statistics Canada, and not wait for a question to come from the opposition.

Let me put this into perspective. One feels that this is not accidental. The fact is that for the last four months, notwithstanding that three reports have been commissioned, as you will recall, by the Clark government and have now been brought down, indicating that some serious things have to be done with respect to Statistics Canada, we have been told by the former minister responsible for Statistics Canada, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston), that he has the matter under review. Now we are being told, literally on the day on which the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates was to have the first opportunity to question the minister on the progress he has made with respect to the three reports, that the responsibility for Statistics Canada has been moved to another minister. We hear that the Minister of