

Privilege—Mr. McGrath

In the course of his remarks the Minister of Justice (Mr. Chrétien), and I think others have said the same thing, emphasized that the advertising ended on September 8. The implication of that is that we should not worry any more about it. However, Madam Speaker, the Minister of State for Multiculturalism has said several times in the past two or three days that he has decided that it is all right to spend federal funds gathered from the taxpayers on advertising under two conditions one, on something that has been passed by Parliament and, two, on something on which there is agreement in principle in Parliament, or a wide consensus or what have you. Therefore it is not a case that closed on September 8. We are now having an announcement by a minister which is completely contrary to the rule that the Hon. Judy LaMarsh told me was the rule in 1965.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Whether it is over or not is not the question.

Mr. Knowles: As the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker) says, whether the advertising is over or not, it should be investigated even if it is over. But I find it disturbing and alarming that the Minister of State for Multiculturalism says that this will be the policy from here on. When the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) was asked whether what the minister said was government policy, the Prime Minister fobbed the question off on the Minister of State for Multiculturalism. He said that he had spoken in his capacity as chairman of the cabinet committee on communications.

● (1600)

Really, we have the right to know what policy is. Judy LaMarsh did not tell me, because I did not press that point, who had made the rule then. We do not know who has made the rule now, but it sets up a situation in which there is gross inequality between the two sides of this House.

As I say, I disagree with many of the things my friends are saying. My friend, the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark), a moment ago characterized this advertising as leading to the breakup of Canada and all of that. Whether I agree with the position of the Conservatives or not, they have the right to take the position, they have the right to argue for it, and they have the right to the same facilities available to the government, particularly if federal funds are involved.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles: Though I have said it before, I am being reminded by my colleague, the hon. member for Broadview-Greenwood (Mr. Rae), so do we; we have views about the constitution and about that other place a few yards to the east of here. We have views that we have tried to make public in the best ways we can, but no public money is available to us for billboard advertising, radio advertising or television advertising. There is an element of unfairness about this which runs counter to the whole principle that here on the floor of Parliament we are equal in terms of our right to present our

case. I believe that equality has been vitiated and damaged by the position the government is taking.

Let me say again, I am not terribly upset about the advertising, but I am upset by the authority with which the Minister of State for Multiculturalism says this is the rule now—that it is his duty to make known to the public of Canada all the information he can give them. The Prime Minister says the public is not as disturbed about information as are members of the Tory party. That is fudging the issue, if anything I ever heard was fudging an issue. The point is: do they have the right by calling it information to use public funds to advertise their side of an issue which has not yet been settled in Parliament? Where I stand on the issue of the constitution does not matter. Indeed, even though I do not agree with the position being taken by the Conservatives on the main issue, I defend their right to equality in the whole picture on the floor of Parliament.

I contend, Madam Speaker, as I said earlier, that you do not have to decide that anyone has done anything wrong. You do not have to take sides on the issue of whether the money has been properly spent or not, but I do think it is clear to you, clear to members of this House, and clear to those who will be following this debate, that there is enough question about what the government has done that the House ought to have the right to decide whether it wants the whole question referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. I hope you will grant the hon. member for St. John's East the right to put his motion. If you do, we shall certainly support it.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Speaker: Order, please. Obviously I will not be able to listen to all those who want to take part in this discussion. Therefore the number of speakers I will recognize in the future will depend very much on how briefly those who are recognized speak. I would suggest it would be reasonable that speakers who are to follow do not take more than five minutes, and it would be even better if they took less. As a media person I was always told there is nothing that could not be said or explained in five minutes. I know this House allows much more freedom in expressing oneself than in a tightly knit radio or television program, but perhaps we could apply that rule to ourselves for the remainder of this discussion.

Mr. Thomas Siddon (Richmond-South Delta): Madam Speaker, I know this debate is taking up some time and I will try to confine myself to five minutes. I have not been here long enough to become quite as verbose as many. I do feel I have a point to make which bears directly on this matter and which has not yet been advanced.

The Minister of State for Multiculturalism (Mr. Fleming) has professed that government advertising on the constitution or, for that matter, on any other question, would not be contemplated without the approval or the implied approval of Parliament. He said that on television, and he said it in the House today.