

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, January 11, 1971

The House met at 2 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. BALDWIN—PACKAGING AND LABELLING BILL— METHOD OF CONSIDERATION BY STANDING COMMITTEE

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I dislike starting the new school period with problems. However, in pursuit of my duty I must raise a question of privilege, notice of which I have given to Your Honour. I consider it to be an exceptionally serious issue, Mr. Speaker. It is one that would be very serious under any conditions, but at this stage of this Parliament, when opposition members have experienced through three sessions the rather arrogant attempts by this authoritarian government to cut the heart out of the parliamentary process, it is even more important that this question be raised.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: The matter I raise has some implications for the Chair as the guardian of our rights and privileges and the protector of minority parties in the House, and to some extent it also affects the officers and staff of the standing committees.

On December 16, after debate, the House gave second reading to Bill C-180 dealing with packaging and labelling, a measure that can be of great importance to many people. To facilitate passage of the bill, members of the opposition—certainly all members of this party—agreed to a restricted debate so that the bill could be given second reading and referred to the committee. At that time the minister quite properly stated there would be ample opportunities when the committee sat for members of the public who may be interested to appear before that committee, although the minister made it quite plain that he was only speaking as a member of the House and that it was up to the committee to decide its own procedure. I should add that the order was in the usual form with no restrictions on the right of the committee to hear evidence. Under Standing Order 65(8) there is ample opportunity for members of the public to appear before the committee, and there were no restrictions in that regard.

• (2.10 p.m.)

Two days after the bill received second reading the House recessed until today and as far as I can tell from examining the records and through discussions with committee members there has been no meeting of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs to which the bill was referred. The bill has never been

considered, nor has there been any decision as to the method of procedure. Yet on December 29 a letter was sent over the signature of the clerk of the committee to Mr. Ernie Steele of the Grocery Products Manufacturers of Canada, who had previously been in touch with the committee clerk about making representations on the bill. Mr. Steele received this letter the next day, and I must put part of it on the record. It refers to a previous letter from Mr. Steele which had been brought to the attention of the hon. member for York East (Mr. Otto), to whom I gave notice that I would be raising this question today. It stated:

Your letter of November 16, 1970, has been brought to the attention of Mr. Steve Otto, Chairman of the Committee, who has requested me to advise you as follows:

When the committee is considering a subjectmatter, outside witnesses will be invited to appear in order to present briefs and answer questions.

During its consideration of bills, the committee will hear only the minister and departmental officials; furthermore, briefs can be submitted but not presented orally at sittings of the committee. Therefore, if you wish to submit a brief on Bill C-180, for distribution to the members of the committee (an up-to-date list is attached), please send me, at your earliest convenience, 25 copies in English and, if possible, 10 copies in French.

The Chairman suggests that you might wish to contact individual Members of Parliament who could support your views, through members of committee who could be the spokesmen for your group; when the committee is considering the bill, Members of Parliament would be welcome to attend and be available to the members of the committee for the purpose of information, argument, etc., when the minister and departmental officials are being examined.

The Chairman feels it would be just as effective to have your case presented as per the procedure outlined above as it would be if it were presented directly.

In passing, I must say I am amazed at the attitude of the hon. member for York East who two years ago circularized a statement to all his constituents in which he said that in his view the committee procedure of the House was not working successfully because the government was insisting that all committee members must do what they were told. He was not a chairman, then.

I suspect that this outrageous attempt to circumscribe the operations of a committee of the House involves more than just the opinion of the chairman. The wording used, the detail in the letter and the way in which proposed rules are laid down, together with previous statements I have heard, indicate that the government is laying its heavy hand on the committees and has issued instructions to chairmen, committee officials and possibly to its own members to act in this way. I suggest that more than just the internal operations of the committee are involved when a letter of this kind is sent over the signature of the clerk of the committee, apparently on the instructions of the chairman.