

Privilege—Mr. Cossitt

Madam Speaker: I will hear the hon. member. I was merely putting hon. members on notice that in the future I would require that the procedure be followed. One of the advantages of being new is that one does not fall into different habits, and reads the standing orders as they are. It is quite clear to me that a written statement is required, and I will require a written statement.

Mr. Cossitt: Madam Speaker, for some time there have been a number of us in this House, including myself, who have wondered about and questioned the peculiar delay on the part of the government in furnishing information to the House, particularly with regard to answering questions on the order paper, the answers to which might be embarrassing, or considered to be embarrassing to the government. We have frequently been assured that everything is being done as speedily as possible, that there is no political interference, that honest answers are always given as soon as they are available and, in short, that the government is doing the very best it can to be co-operative with the House.

I have always doubted such assurances and expressed such doubts in the House in the past. But now the matter becomes one of a most serious nature that infringes on the privileges of members of the House, because of the existence of strange and peculiar guidelines of a top secret nature laid down by the government in regard to the answering of questions by cabinet ministers, which indicate that this House may have been duped, misled, or cheated by a possible government attempt deliberately to withhold truth from the members of the House and consequently from the Canadian people.

As evidence of what I have been saying, Madam Speaker, I possess a copy of a document originating in the Privy Council office and apparently known to the Prime Minister's office which is marked "secret—not to be photocopied or reproduced". The document is headed "sensitive topics" and also gives the information that the topics listed were in effect to be treated as sensitive when questioned during the second session of the Thirtieth Parliament, that is, up to the defeat of this government on May 22, 1979. I have determined from sources beyond reproach that the same instructions have been reintroduced by the government in this session of this Parliament and they have applied since this government was returned to office after the election of February 18, 1980.

● (1510)

I hope you will permit me, Madam Speaker, to read the document as it would be impossible to judge my question of privilege without the contents being known, on which my question of privilege is based.

At the outset may I say that I realize when something happens outside the House it is usually ruled not to be a question of privilege inside the House. In this case, however, I draw specific attention to the fact that, while the document was issued outside the House, its provisions have been applied inside the House.

The sensitive topics listed by the government for the attention of ministers include items numbered A to Z in this document. In most cases it can be clearly noted that questions on the order paper asking for information on matters mentioned have either never been answered or have been treated with non-answers, which adds proof to the fact that the list has been applied to the method in which the government has acted.

First, in regard to myself as the member for Leeds-Grenville, the document contains a direct interference with my privileges by instructing cabinet ministers as to the sensitivity of, and I quote directly, "any question in the name of the hon. member for Leeds." In other words, this government, presumably on the highest authority of Michael Pitfield and/or the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) and/or the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), and perhaps others, has circulated secret instructions to ministers which, in effect, tell them to hamper and tamper with legitimate questions asked in this House by myself and others. I submit, Madam Speaker, that this interferes directly with my ability and that of others to conduct our duties as members in this House in the manner that we should and, therefore, is a breach of privilege.

Some hon. Members: Shame!

Mr. Cossitt: The other subjects listed in this startling document are as follows, and each speaks for itself as to where it interferes with our privileges. I should therefore like to quote the document exactly. It is marked "SECRET—Not to be photocopied or reproduced"—with the heading "Sensitive Topics." These are as follows: travel by the Prime Minister, ministers or public servants by plane, train or taxi; official residences; all expenditures by the Prime Minister, ministers, public servants, departments or agencies for goods, buildings or services; all expenditures for government programs; loans, grants or tenders awarded by any agent of the federal government; Prime Minister's, ministers' or public service establishment or salary figures; regional offices of ministers or departments; possible or alleged conflicts of interest; consultants, consultants' studies or contracts for consulting; lawyers retained by departments or agencies; government mailing or publication lists; advertising or publications; former Liberal candidates or office-holders; former public servants; Statistics Canada; CBC Radio-Canada and Radio-Canada International; Crown companies; relocation of departments or agencies; ports or railways; payments to provinces or municipalities; Dominion-provincial relations; bilingualism-official languages policy; invasion of privacy; freedom of information; individual, non-continuing items that might be identified—whatever that might be—and, finally, as I said earlier, any question in the name of the hon. member for Leeds.

To summarize, Madam Speaker, questions on these topics, if answered forthrightly, would indeed be sensitive and embarrassing to the government, and the document clearly illustrates that the government is not approaching the making public of information from a standpoint of proper disclosure but, instead, on the basis of political considerations.