

Point of Order

government department which is charged with the actual work with respect to asbestos is, of course, the Department of Public Works, with the help and assistance of the Department of Health.

There was a meeting of the Board of Internal Economy today at noon, and I think that I have the support of all members to say to the House and the public that the board, as the employer of all the employees on the Hill, considers that it must take with very grave concern suggestions that there may in fact be difficulties, and the board is proceeding to do so.

I will, of course, make arrangements as soon as our first report comes in from our consultant to make that information available to hon. members and to make available from then on subsequent information which is important and which goes to convey to all hon. members and to our employees what is being done, first of all if there is a danger, second, what that danger may be or the extent of it and, third, what is being done about it and what can be done about it.

The hon. member for Cape Breton—East Richmond. Just a moment, perhaps before the hon. member proceeds, I could deliver to the Table the documents of which I just spoke.

The hon. member for Cape Breton—East Richmond and then I will hear the hon. member for Kamloops.

Mr. Dingwall: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you for your statement and your assurance that you will provide additional information come mid-January with regard to this important issue.

The hon. Minister of Public Works is in the House at the present time, I know it is unusual to make this request since Question Period has expired, but I wonder if the minister would undertake to provide to the House and to members copies of all of the various tests with which his department is now seized to in regard to the issue of asbestos within the Parliament Buildings so that we can have full disclosure and a full examination of all of the facts. Thereafter, of course, these would be given to the independent individual who will be retained by the Board of Internal Economic in order to make a final and complete assessment and to give assurances, not only to members of Parliament and their employees but, indeed, all people who work on Parliament Hill.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member has put a question to the minister who has, of course, been listening carefully to the statement by the Chair. Strictly speaking, unless the House agrees, I would have to say that I am in the hands of the minister. The minister may want to respond.

Hon. Elmer M. MacKay (Minister of Public Works): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the gravity of the situation and the desire of all colleagues to be fully apprised of the situation. I will take the request very seriously. I do not know if there are procedural reasons or any other reasons why I could not comply with this, but I will undertake to report back.

I might say that precautions have been taken. Members might like to know, for example, that one sensitive area, the attic of the West Block, has been sealed off. Security officers have been instructed to make sure that access to the attic, which has steel beams covered with asbestos, is not readily available. I am advised that the security service of the House has agreed to keep the door of this area locked in view of any possible risks, and that the access door was completely weatherstripped to make sure that the asbestos is totally contained within the attic space. The House also knows that where renovations are undertaken to the parliamentary precincts, such as in the Wellington Building, asbestos is removed at that time with appropriate precautions.

I also understand, although I am no expert on the matter obviously, that in an inert form, that is to say, not in viable form, asbestos is not generally regarded as particularly hazardous. However, if it is disturbed around service areas, this is not the case.

I think, Mr. Speaker, you also mentioned that when the issue was raised by a colleague in the House last month, on November 19, I believe, several tests were undertaken with the co-operation of my colleague, the minister of health and welfare, as to air quality, and there was no evidence at that time that there was any hazard. But our department is anxious to carry on with this inspection. Of course we will act as the servants of the line departments and the House and carry out whatever instructions you see fit to give us.

Mr. Riis: Mr. Speaker, you indicated that you would be acting expeditiously in terms of identifying an independent firm to evaluate quickly the situation. I would simply like to add that perhaps in your deliberations at the appropriate time, and as soon as possible with the firm in question, that you would encourage the firm to be