

Oral Questions

indeed a commitment and that Mr. Bourassa had received a commitment from the then Prime Minister. I took precautions.

As I said earlier, on Tuesday, I discussed the matter hypothetically in Cabinet, saying in effect, if we receive some information confirming all of this, can I go ahead? The Cabinet did give me the go-ahead; as for the amount of money, it was set, as required by Cabinet, by Treasury Board, which sat yesterday afternoon. It always sits on Thursday afternoon.

I myself was notified of Mr. Mulroney's letter or of Mr. Shortliffe's telegram giving us Mr. Mulroney's version, and we accepted it. It is no more complicated than that.

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, beyond the question which has now been settled, the payment of what is owed to Quebec, there is a serious question concerning the proper behaviour of a Prime Minister in telling this House the truth. Nothing should prevent this House from knowing the facts. This House was told by the Prime Minister that he had no answer from Mr. Mulroney, when we know today that he had a complete answer, the same answer which was the basis of his decision yesterday to pay.

Does the Prime Minister realize that his statement that he had received no answer from Mr. Mulroney was likely to mislead the opposition and prevent it from getting to the bottom of this issue as it should?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I myself answered all the questions I was asked on this subject in this House. I have just explained clearly that it involved \$34 million of Canadian taxpayers' money, as a result of the question raised by the Leader of the Opposition claiming that the federal government had made a commitment.

I took the necessary action to find out if there was a commitment from the federal government. He would have been the first to criticize me if I had acted on mere hearsay. I did what was necessary to assure myself that we could act as soon as possible with all the information in hand. A prime minister must act in such a prudent fashion. I acted with caution, as a reasonable man would.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, yesterday during Question Period, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs were obviously not aware that a written answer had been received from Mr. Mulroney. Yet, that answer had already arrived.

Will the Prime Minister confirm that he kept his Deputy Prime Minister and his Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs in the dark, since Mr. Mulroney's letter had already reached his office around 1.30 p.m., before Question Period?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I could not inform the Deputy Prime Minister, since I was only told about that letter at 3.05 p.m. I decided not to show up for Question Period because my meeting with the Prime Minister of Tanzania took longer than expected. The letter was sent to my

office but I was not there; I was at home. I was informed about it by telephone at 3.05 p.m. Obviously I could not tell the Minister of the Environment at 2 p.m. about something I received at 3.05 p.m. My office received a letter at 1.55 p.m., but I was not there. I am being criticized for not reading a letter which arrived in my office across the street, and not at my office here. I was not in my office. I am therefore being criticized for not having read a letter I had not seen.

• (1125)

Mr. Bouchard: Do you not have a fax machine?

Mr. Chrétien (Saint-Maurice): I did not send that letter. It is up to the sender to make sure the letter reaches its recipient. I did not receive that letter. Since when do we blame people for not having a letter they did not receive? I received that letter at 3.05 p.m. and the issue was settled two hours later. This shows how efficient our government is.

This morning I was expecting the Leader of the Opposition and other MPs to congratulate the government for taking swift action and making the right decision. I am surprised at how partisan they can be.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister is not here, it is customary for the Deputy Prime Minister to answer on his behalf.

Does the Prime Minister recognize that by acting as they did the senior officials in the PMO and the Privy Council kept the Deputy Prime Minister in the dark and prevented her from accurately answering the questions asked by the opposition? Does the Prime Minister of Canada think he acted as a prudent man should?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I explained that the letter arrived when the House was convening. It takes a few moments to go over a document, and I was not there. The Deputy Prime Minister sat in this House and answered based on what she knew. We received a letter at 1.55 p.m. and we are being blamed for not providing an appropriate answer until 2.55 p.m. when the first question was put to us. If the letter had been sent to us at noon, we would have been able to answer at 2 p.m. but, as it happens, we received the letter at precisely 1.55 p.m. So, it took us exactly 70 minutes. We are fast, but not that fast. If we have not seen something, we cannot have read it.

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[English]

GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES

Mr. Stephen Harper (Calgary West): Mr. Speaker, last night Canadian taxpayers became aware that they had an additional financial obligation of \$34.5 million, two years after a Conservative government supposedly committed to it and months after a Liberal government had been in the process of denying that commitment existed.