

Oral Questions

● (1510)

This morning, at the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications, the hon. member for Assiniboia, who is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, acted in the minister's place on a number of occasions and asked two questions which were clearly self-serving and intended, in essence, to allow the minister to explain a previous position he had taken or explain something he had previously said.

An hon. Member: What is wrong with that?

Mr. Horner: That is not the purpose of the committee. The purpose of the committee is to examine and inquire into government spending. The hon. member for St. John's East has pointed out that our time is limited and that we must be given as much time as possible in order to do that. Let me suggest, sir, that you not make any hurried ruling on this matter raised by the hon. member as it is very important and will certainly be precedent-setting in respect of the procedures of the committees of this House for some time to come.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I rise on the point of order now under consideration. There has been a practice, not only in respect of the standing committees of this House but also in respect of joint committees of the House of Commons and the Senate to have parliamentary secretaries among their memberships. I am not suggesting they are not well-intentioned, but from time to time they leave their place at the committee table and move to the position of the witness being examined in the absence of the minister.

I can remember that happening in relation to the hon. member for Ottawa West on the joint committee in respect of the Finkelman report. It also happened on another occasion in relation to a joint committee on which I had the honour of serving. This involved the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of State for Urban Affairs. He was a member of that committee when it was dealing with the national capital.

It seems to me that in considering the point raised by the hon. member for St. John's East, added to by the hon. member for Crowfoot, regarding this ability to both answer and ask questions in the committees and on the floor of the House of Commons, we ought to take into account the fact that they occupy a special relationship in respect of the operations of a ministry. Because of this special position which they enjoy, involving an additional emolument, with access to information and other things, with the ability to influence policy in a way not available to the average private member, we ought to consider this role in terms of the presence at all of parliamentary secretaries on committees. They are in a position to examine material not available to the average member, and if Your Honour is going to consider this question at some length you should consider the special position enjoyed by parliamentary secretaries.

I want to make it very clear, especially to the parliamentary secretaries whose names I have mentioned in the course of these remarks, that I am not suggesting they have in any way acted in bad faith. I make these remarks more in terms of proper practice or the practice that ought

[Mr. Horner.]

to prevail in committees of this House as well as joint committees.

In the event Your Honour does not find there is a valid point of order, I hope you will give this question consideration. I think it is important that this matter be considered in terms of the practices of the House. It may be that reference of this matter to the committee on procedure and organization would be in order. We cannot forget that parliamentary secretaries enjoy a special position in this House and a special position in terms of the ministries, and we ought to consider that special position in terms of having them form part of a committee of the House of Commons which may very well be dealing with a specific matter coming under their jurisdiction.

Mr. Speaker: There are at least four other hon. members who wish to participate in this matter. Let me make it clear, as a preliminary observation, that I do not intend to stop any hon. member participating in the discussion. However, I think I should point out that there are two points in respect of which my opinion is quite clear.

The first point relates to my opinion in respect of the role of parliamentary secretaries with the special responsibilities they have and, therefore, the limitations I would propose to exercise in presiding over the meetings of this assembly, specifically during the question period. I have no reason to change my opinion in that regard. I made that decision after careful consideration and representation. This is my view, and it is the view I take in exercising my decision whether to recognize a parliamentary secretary for the purpose of asking questions during the question period.

The second point has been amply demonstrated here, and I think it is worth while. We have under review another decision in respect of a complaint about the proceedings of standing committees, namely, a request that the Chair review a procedural decision concerning a complaint by an hon. member of one standing committee regarding the comments or remarks of another hon. member of the same standing committee. My second observation in this regard is that the Chair does not exercise procedural control over standing committees. Let me reaffirm my opinion that standing committees are, and must remain, the masters of their own procedure.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Speaker: Unless the rules of this House are changed in some way, I have no intention or desire of entering into, by way of appeal or review, in any way, shape or form, the decisions that ought to be made or taken into account by a standing committee. I am certainly not going to look over the shoulder of any chairman of any committee or enter into a procedural matter by saying it was proper or improper.

There is a question of privilege before the House and I at no time intend to restrict comment on that matter. The hon. member for Athabasca raised a question of privilege the other day and I heard a number of contributions on that matter. I intend to listen to the fullest possible development of any question of privilege, but that is not going to draw me across the line as far as supervising the procedures of committees by way of suggestion or appeal.